

**The power of place: Teachers' perception on effective professional development**

by

Gwendolen Susanne Jacobs

B.S., Kansas State University, 1993

M.S., University of Kansas, 1998

M.S., Baker University, 2014

AN ABSTRACT OF A DISSERTATION

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

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Department of Education  
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## **Abstract**

Professional development provides opportunities for teachers to acquire the knowledge needed to become experts in their classroom content and to improve their instructional skills to meet the needs of today's student learners. While districts and curriculum leaders work to improve professional development design, teachers' dissatisfaction with current professional development practices are still problematic. Teachers continue to find it ineffective, irrelevant, making them feel undervalued as professionals. This is evident in the rural educational setting. Rural educators need on-going, flexible, and job-embedded effective professional development to meet the specific needs of rural educators and their students. While few studies have examined teacher perception on professional development, even fewer studies focused on the rural place. This study provides educational leaders with a teacher's perspective on what effective professional development looks and feels like for rural educators. Using narrative analysis of five rural educators' interviews and drawing on Gruenewald's Critical Pedagogy of Place, this study sought to understand the experiences of five rural educators as they explored their personal histories, perceptions, and experiences in receiving effective professional development.

The study is driven by three research questions to determine if teachers' perceptions of effective professional development is influenced by their own sense of place and how they identify within that place. These questions included the following:

1. How do teachers in a rural setting perceive building and district level professional development?
2. In what ways does sense of place inform teachers' perceptions of effective professional development?

3. In what ways do these perceptions inform teachers' decisions to act on their new learning?

The key themes revealed participants acknowledged the challenges districts face when providing effective professional development and that it is most beneficial when connected to their specific needs. Most participants acknowledged the complexity of rural relationships and recognized how their personal histories and experiences helped make and enrich these relationships. The findings relative to the five participants' experiences and their stories also suggest rural teachers do not fully recognize the extent by which their own sense of place and place identity influenced their perceptions on their learning. This can have several implications for district leaders, professional development directors and for current and future rural educators. If district leaders and professional development directors want to see implementation of teacher learning in the classroom, providing purposeful professional development must not only address the specific needs of rural educators and their students but also consider what teachers bring to the rural context in relationship to their professional learning.

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Approved by:  
Major Professor  
Dr. Spencer Clark

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## **Dedication**

I would like to dedicate this to all the rural educators out there who are making a difference and achieving great things. Your love for teaching and dedication to your students is unwavering. Thank you for all that you do and give, each and every day.

## **Chapter 1 - Introduction**

As an educator for over twenty years and having taught in suburban, rural, and urban school districts, I have seen many programs and initiatives come and go, some even have circled back just with a fresh look or catchier name. What seems to remain the same is how teachers experience professional learning or professional development. Yes, in recent years there have been several studies and research on effective professional development and personalizing professional learning (Berry, 2016; Darling-Hammond et al., 2009; DeMonte 2013; Gulamhussein, 2013; Guskey, 2002), and district and building leaders are moving in the right direction when it comes to offering professional learning experiences. However, they have failed to effectively integrate professional learning into our educational experience, thus failing to make professional learning purposeful and authentic, so teachers seamlessly and effortlessly are applying it into their classrooms.

As my professional career advanced over the years, I was fortunate to be part of many collaborative professional development teams where we worked to create and develop effective professional development. Incorporating choice and teacher voice in the development design and providing a variety of learning opportunities guided how we planned professional learning. However, despite our best efforts and time invested, new learning never really seemed to influence how teachers taught in the classroom. In addition, I too felt like the professional learning I engaged in never really fit with my professional learning goals, and rarely did I see a need to incorporate new learning into the classroom. As an educational leader and one who helped develop professional development, I felt completely overwhelmed and almost defeated in my efforts. As a result, I continue to ask myself “What am I missing?” What must be considered

in order to address these deficits or gaps that would make professional learning purposeful and authentic for teachers?

Currently, as a leader in a rural district and charged with leading professional development, these questions are at the forefront of my decision making. Over this past year, I have realized opportunities for professional learning and professional development, while lacking in resources for some rural districts, may also be ill-designed to meet the specific needs of rural teachers and their students. With this in mind, my research topic narrowed to focus on rural teachers and how they view themselves and their educational upbringing in determining what they perceive to be effective professional learning. My overarching question became *How do teachers' sense of place and educational upbringing influence their perceptions of effective professional development in a rural setting?*

### **Rationale for the Study**

Every year teachers head back to school engaged in professional learning opportunities in hopes of improving instruction, increasing students' outcomes, and becoming experts in their field. With so many districts requiring specific professional learning in a limited amount of time, how do we make professional learning personalized so teachers can seamlessly move from theory to practice? What are the underlying causes and challenges in making professional learning a personalized experience for teachers? What are teacher's perceptions or beliefs toward their own learning and how do these perceptions or beliefs impact the learning they are receiving? Ultimately, policies such as No Child Left Behind (2001), College and Career Readiness Standards (2010) as well as Every Students Succeeds Act (2015) influenced the way teachers engaged in professional learning. Learning Forward (formerly known as the National Staff Development Council) revamped its professional development standards in 2011, renaming

it Professional Learning Standards, in order to support the demands and high stakes accountability placed on teacher and student outcomes. The intent focused on teacher learning and student outcomes, but policy changes and new learning standards do not equate to teacher learning nor improved student outcomes. Research continues to support district leaders are failing to meet teachers needs by offering professional learning as “one-stop” workshop style of professional development (Gulamhussein, 2013) which is usually irrelevant, not effective and “not connected to the important work of helping students learn” (Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, 2014).

Moreover, research continues to identify that teacher perceptions about the learning they receive and their own beliefs toward that learning influences what is seen in the classroom and the impact it has on student outcomes. Still teachers do not believe they have a stake in their own learning, even though some research studies show teachers feel districts are making concerted efforts in improving professional learning (Learning Forward, 2017; Hirsh, 2015). Part of the research revealed when provided autonomy to select their own professional learning, teachers’ perceptions on the perceived effectiveness of that professional learning increases (Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, 2014). In addition, Fullan and Hargreaves (2012) posit districts that work to build professional capital in their teachers creates “a culture of collaboration” and allows teachers to be the drivers of improvement, where they use their expertise and knowledge to share with each other and are given autonomy to make important decision about teacher and student learning. Of course, in order to do so, districts must teach building leaders to be co-leaders and to “broker the strengths of their teaching colleagues” while teachers must be willing to be transparent with each other about what works, what doesn’t and to develop a “collective know-how” (Berry, 2016).



While most empirical research supports teachers are participating in highly effective professional development, much of the research comes from studies that look at suburban or urban settings (Mohan, Lingam, & Chand, 2017a; Wallace, 2014). Although Glover et al. (2016) study did find that PD experiences, perceptions, and practices across all locales (rural, urban, and suburban) were more similar than different, much of the current research has referenced limited resources exists for rural schools causing a disadvantage for rural teachers and students (Hunt-Barron, Tracy, Howell, & Kaminski, 2015; Howley & Howley, 2005; Lynch, 2000; Marlow & Cooper, 2008; Rude & Brewer, 2003). Hunt-Barron et al. (2015) posits that lack of funding and resources for rural teachers as well as social inequalities will continue to challenge rural schools and their professional development efforts.

### **Statement of Problem**

The difficulty in providing effective professional development for teachers compounds the growing problems facing rural schools. One such problem is geography. Schools that are geographically dispersed vary in their specific needs based on their unique contexts making professional development challenging (Hunt-Barron et al., 2015). As a result of being physically distant and having limited funds, a lack of available staffing to support professional development efforts such as instructional coaches and consultants exists (Glover et al., 2016). Other concerns that continue to thwart professional development efforts include having dated resources and out of date classrooms and labs. Oftentimes, one teacher will teach multiple grade levels and multiple subjects making it difficult to identify what the professional development needs are for rural teachers (Glover et al., 2016; Lynch, 2000; Marlow & Cooper, 2008). Howley and Howley (2005) have noted that while research continues to document the “challenges associated with professional development efforts in rural areas and underscore the need to consider the rural

context,” research in teacher professional development in rural education is underrepresented (Barrett et al., 2015; Glover et al., 2016). Although there have been studies on pre-service teachers and teacher educator programs focusing on rural context, place-based pedagogy and place consciousness (Azano and Stewart, 2015; Cicchinelli, 2011) and some studies that focused on the impact specific types of professional development used in rural schools (Barrett et al., 2015), little is known about how rural teachers conceptualize their own sense of place and how their place identities intersect with their own experiences can influence what they perceive to be effective professional development. In other words, research has yet to explore how one’s own sense of place and teachers’ own cultural contexts inform their perceptions on what is effective professional development and whether these perceptions inform their decisions to act on this new learning.

### **Research Purpose and Design**

The purpose of this research is to explore how teachers’ sense of place and educational upbringing inform what they perceive to be effective professional development, so teachers are more likely to act on this new learning. The research study includes five teacher participants, who vary in teaching experience, ranging from two to twenty plus years of experience, who may or may not live within a rural community as defined by distant rural, and who may have rural or nonrural background experiences.

### **Research Questions**

This study examines whether teachers’ sense of place and educational upbringing bears any influence on their perceptions of effective professional development and whether it informs their decisions to act on this new knowledge. The overarching question is *How do teachers’ sense of place and educational upbringing influence their perceptions of effective professional*

*development in a rural setting?* In unpacking this question, the study addresses the following sub-questions:

1. How do teachers in a rural setting perceive building and district level professional development?
2. In what ways does sense of place inform teachers' perceptions of effective professional development?
3. In what ways do these perceptions inform teachers' decisions to act on their new learning?

The goal of the study is to gain insight into what teachers perceive to be the most effective professional development experiences so rural districts can better understand how to integrate effective professional development for teacher professional growth and implementation in the classroom.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework selected for this study is rooted in Gruenewald's Critical Pedagogy of Place. It is through this theory, we are able to examine "the place-specific nexus between environment, culture, and education" and explore how the subtle nuances of rural life such as social, political, and ecological, help rural teachers to conceptualize their own sense of place and how it informs their perceptions of effective professional development (Gruenewald 2003a, p. 9).

### **Operationalization of Constructs**

Defining the following terms will help explain the major topics in this study, which includes defining effective professional development, rural setting, teacher/educator, and situating the topic through a critical theory of place framework (Gruenewald, 2003a).

*Critical Pedagogy of Place:* Gruenewald (2003a) synthesized two distinct theories of literature: Critical Theory and Pedagogy of Place to form a much-needed theoretical framework for educational theory and research. He called it Critical Pedagogy of Place. According to Gruenewald (2003a), place-based pedagogies are needed “so that the education of citizens might have some direct bearing on the well-being of the social and ecological places people actually inhabit” and critical theory is needed to “challenge the assumptions, practices and outcomes taken for granted in dominant culture and in conventional education” (p. 3). Separate, each theory stands on its own terms; however, Gruenewald points out, without pitting one against another, that critical pedagogy lacks a consideration for place, as place-based education all too often disregards sociocultural politics. He argues that while critical pedagogy is concerned with people and society, place-based education tends to be more focused on the interactions with space and people and acting together, they can strengthen each other, creating a balanced pedagogy. Thus, critical pedagogy of place examines “the place-specific nexus between environment, culture, and education” and as such one can consider the special nuances (social, ecological, and political) of rural life (Gruenewald, 2003a). In this study, I seek to understand how teachers conceptualize their own sense of place, through the critical lens of place, and how their place identities intersect with their professional development experiences in a rural setting and how those perceptions inform their decision to act.

*Bakhtin's Theory of Language* -. Makhail Bakhtin (1981) theory of language helps researchers to understand the complex social interactions that are present every day in schools and in classrooms. Bakhtin's concept of heteroglossia --“the way in which the utterances we construct as we engage in dialogue with one another are colored and shaped by the socially specific environment in which they are crafted and the larger 'sociological consciousness’” --

suggests words do not exist by themselves but between the contexts the speaker uses them in and the “alien” contexts the receiver brings to that dialogue (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 276). The complexity of language makes social interactions multidimensional thereby making teachers’ interactions with each other during professional development and their interactions within their environment contribute to their perceptions on what they find effective.

*Bakhtin’s Theory of Dialogism* – Bakhtin believed that one’s speech is continuously shaped by the interactions and experiences of assimilating others’ words. Bakhtin argued that “all our utterances are filled with others’ words, varying degrees of ‘our-own-ness’... which we assimilate, rework and reaccentuate” (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 89). Believing that there is no singular voice but instead voices-within-voices each adjusting and readjusting for recognition and understanding of each other. Through his process Bakhtin identifies two essential dialogic distinctions: the difference between *authoritative discourse* and an *internally persuasive discourse* – each having implications in the field of education. It is through this authoritative discourse and the internally persuasive discourse that can be used to further categorize and analyze teachers’ perceptions of rural and its influence on what is perceived to be effective professional development.

*Defining Rural* - For the purpose of this study, the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES), provides the definitions and parameters of participants. NCES defines rural areas as: *fringe rural*, *distant rural* or *remote rural*. Fringe rural is a “Census-defined rural territory that is less than or equal to 5 miles from an urbanized area, as well as rural territory that is less than or equal to 2.5 miles from an urban cluster. Distant rural is a “Census-defined rural territory that is more than 5 miles but less than or equal to 25 miles from an urbanized area, as well as rural territory that is more than 2.5 miles but less than or equal to 10 miles from an urban

cluster,” while *remote rural* is a “Census-defined rural territory that is more than 25 miles from an urbanized area and is also more than 10 miles from an urban cluster” (NCES, 2006).

*Defining Rurality-* Defining the location is one aspect of identifying rural; however, being rural is not solely determined by quantitative measures, rather “rurality” can be a theoretical construct. Eppley (2009) contends that rurality as a social and cultural construct (as opposed to a bureaucratically delineated category) implies a deep connection to place, that the rural place is much more than simply a backdrop to one’s life. In fact, Kline & Walker-Gibbs (2015) further suggests that rurality “as a cultural construct” is “concerned with community demographics and the interaction between residents” (p. 68-69); that this interaction not only depends on geography, demography and economy but also includes shared norms that individuals come to know, accept and are part of everyday interactions and experiences (Vernikoff et al., 2018). As Tieken (2014) further conveys:

This understanding, shared by many of the residents of rural communities, is tied to place; it provides a geography-dependent sense of belonging. Rural, in this conception, is not simply a matter of boundaries. It constitutes one’s identity; it shapes perspectives and understandings; and it gives meaning to one’s daily experiences. (p. 5)

In fact, rural teachers understand this and in part, “may define their identity” through this “connection to a rural place” (Eppley, 2009), regardless of what a census bureau identifies as rural or not.

*Teacher-* For the purpose of this research, a teacher is defined as “one that teaches; one whose occupation is to instruct” (teacher, 2016) and an educator is defined as “one skilled in teaching” (educator, 2016). These terms will be used interchangeably because they are both skilled in the art of teaching.

*Defining Effective Professional Development* – “Structured professional learning [which] results in changes in teacher practices and improvements in student learning outcomes” (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017, p. v).

## **Limitations**

This study, through a critical theory of place lens, addresses teachers’ perceptions of effective professional development and the implications of those perceptions to act in the classroom. This section describes potential limitations and possibilities for the study.

To begin, participants volunteer for the study. Those who volunteered for the study are carefully identified through close social networks, ensuring they meet the necessary parameters and be willing participants in the study. The participants would range from first year to ten years of experience in teaching and come from a variety of rural, suburban, or urban backgrounds. This will allow the researcher to further deepen how sense of place and cultural contexts informs teachers’ perceptions on effective professional development. A limitation of this participant pool would be if all participants worked in the same rural district or very similar rural districts and if many of them were very new or had limited professional development experiences. Another limitation relates to the use of purposive sampling to select research participants, and the small number of participants in the pool size, which may introduce some form of bias into research findings. In addition, the use of open-ended interview questions and the utilization of documents to spur reflection can limit the scope of inquiry because this interview technique is reliant on a participant’s honesty and detailed accounts of those experiences. However, using in-depth narrative analysis allows the researcher to understand the experience being shared and obtain information that “people do not consciously know themselves,” thus creating a rich and detailed study (Bell, 2002).

## **Summary**

Professional development is the vehicle that provides educators with knowledge, strategies, and skills to meet the needs of today's student learners. It must be collaborative, sustainable over a long period of time, job-embedded, data-driven and classroom centered (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; ESSA, 2015; Learning Forward, 2017). While research does reveal teachers are participating in highly effective professional development, the fact remains that much of that research is situated in suburban and urban settings and not in the rural context (Mohan, Lingam, & Chand, 2017a; Wallace, 2014). This is concerning since many rural districts continue to struggle with hiring and retaining quality teachers as well as continue to face and struggle to overcome many of the challenges associated with rural professional development. Through a critical theory of place lens, the purpose of this study is to reveal how teachers' sense of place and educational upbringing informs their perceptions on effective professional development and whether or not this new-found awareness informs their decision to act on new knowledge in the classroom.



## Chapter 2 - Literature Review

Research reveals a discrepancy in teachers' perceptions about what is effective professional development. Current literature continues to document the challenges related to professional development in rural areas; however, what it fails to do is represent teacher professional development in rural education literature (Glover et al., 2016). Reagan et al. (2019) contends that there is a need for research "on the pedagogy of rural teacher education that critically examines teacher educators' beliefs, perspectives of and relationships to rural places" (p. 91) and argues more research should be done that even includes "the voices and perspectives of students and community members in living in rural places" (p. 92). While there is a need for research in rural education across many facets, this study will focus on teachers and address how one's lived experiences in a rural context inform teachers' perceptions of effective professional development and to what degree if any does this influence their decisions to implement in the classroom.

### Review of Research

The primary databases and search engines used to perform the literature review include Google Scholar, EBSCO, and ERIC. Much of the research was conducted using keywords such as *educator, professional development, teacher professional development, rural teacher professional development, effective teacher professional development, rural educator, rural education, critical theory of place, place-based pedagogy, place-consciousness* which yielded several reports and articles based on preservice teacher education programs, field-experiences, place-based pedagogy, and place-consciousness approaches to education. Peer-reviewed research and credible reports that centered on place, place-conscious, place-based education and teacher professional learning were prioritized for this literature review.

## **Purpose**

The purpose of this literature review is to explore Gruenewald's critical theory of place framework to unearth how current rural teachers perceive effective professional development that informs their decision to implement this new learning in the classroom. This review includes articles on what defines effective professional development and what current research reveals about the professional development teachers receive in rural schools. In addition, this review provides background knowledge and understanding of critical theory of place and its relationship to informing teachers' perception on what is effective professional development.

## **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework is guided by the following philosophical assumptions. Ontologically, the reality of "what is" is based on the participant's lived experiences and perceptions (Crotty, 1998). Epistemologically, the knowledge revealed will be constructed as "a socially negotiated process" that develops between the participants and researcher (Shabani, 2016). Methodologically, the research will be inductive and derived from semi-structured interviews, classroom observations and object-elicited interviews that ask participants to assess their sense of place and how it influences their perceptions of professional learning. This will be presented in narrative form.

## **Critical Theory of Place**

Gruenewald (2003a) synthesized two distinct theories of literature: Critical Theory and Pedagogy of Place to form Critical Pedagogy of Place. He argued that while critical pedagogy offers a "transformational educational response to institutional and ideological domination" (p. 4) and place-based education puts place at the forefront of learning by connecting place with self and community, he felt that neither pedagogy provided a clear and complete response to

curricular reform. He claimed by combining critical pedagogy and place-based education into a critical pedagogy of place, he strengthened each other, thus creating a balanced pedagogy.

Critical pedagogy of place examines “the place-specific nexus between environment, culture, and education” and as such one can consider the special nuances (social, ecological, and political) of rural life (Gruenewald, 2003a).

### **Construction of the Theory**

To understand Gruenewald’s critical theory of place is to examine what is place-based education and what is critical pedagogy, as well as to briefly discuss the epistemologies that inform these pedagogical approaches.

According to Freire, Giroux, and McLaren (Gruenewald, 2003a), critical pedagogy extends from a Marxist critical theory with a focus that examines issues of power and recognizes the personal is political (p. 4). Largely influenced by Freire and Giroux, critical pedagogy maintains that “educators and students should become ‘transformative intellectuals’ (Giroux, 1988), ‘cultural workers’ (Freire, 1998) capable of identifying and redressing the injustices, inequalities, and myths of an often-oppressive world” (Gruenewald, 2003a, p. 4). Focusing on decolonization, which for educational purposes means “unlearning much of that dominant culture and schooling teaches us in learning more socially just and ecologically sustainable ways of being in the world” (Gruenewald, 2003a, p. 9), critical pedagogy provides space for learners to engage in Freire’s (1972) concept of *conscientization*, or critical consciousness, that allows us “to take action against the oppressive elements of reality” (Freire, 1995, as cited in Gruenewald, 2003a, p. 5). In other words, critical pedagogy of place recognizes places where critical consciousness occurs (Gruenewald, 2003a) and can help teachers transform their teaching

experiences into professional knowledge through a deeper understanding of the social, political and cultural reality of the educational context (Kincheloe, 2005).

Of course, the focus on how the present is influenced by the past is a key characteristic of critical constructivism. Critical constructivism asserts that the self is “shaped by social action” and that the “scars and traumas of the past” can be “rethought and reshaped by social action” (Kincheloe, 2008, p. 82). Strongly influenced by Kincheloe’s (2008) work, critical constructivism involved the awareness of the ways in which one’s “political opinions, religious beliefs, gender roles or racial perspectives have been shaped by dominant perspectives” (p. 82) thus making the pedagogical goal of critical constructivism to “expose the particular ways knowledge is produced and the impact it exerts on the production of self-hood,” that with the self being “a social and historical construction” (Kincheloe, 2008, p. 82). Clearly, critical constructivism promotes a personal and social consciousness, helping to motivate individuals to take constructive action.

Critical pedagogy, while focused on the social and urban contexts, often fails to attend to the ecological and rural issues (Gruenewald, 2003a, p. 3). Gruenewald (2003a) found studies that focus on place tend to center only on urban spaces. But even at that, Gruenewald (2003a) claimed those studies were limited in the analysis of the “interactions between cultures and ecosystems” (p. 5). To further clarify what these interactions might be, Gruenewald cites Bowers (2001) critical framework of *eco-justice* for educational theory and practice, where its aim is to “develop an ethic of social and ecological justice where issues of race, class, gender, language, politics, and economics must be worked out in terms of people’s relationship to their total environments, human and non-human” (p. 6). The fact that individuals tend to prioritize issues of race, class, gender, language, environment, economics differently, critical pedagogy can connect

to place based education that will challenge individuals “to reflect on their own concrete situationally in a way the explores the complex relationships between cultural and economic environments” (Gruenewald, 2003a, p. 6). Bringing this together would require not only decolonization that critical pedagogy focuses on but also reinhabitation in which place based education attends to (Gruenewald, 2003a, p. 9). It is here Gruenewald (2003a) cites Berg and Dasmann’s (1990) definition of reinhabitation as “learning to live-in-place in an area that has been disrupted and injured through past exploitation” (p. 35). In other words, in order for individuals to learn to live in places that have endured historically, the social and ecological exploitation, requires “reeducating people in the art of living well where they are,” even if it differs geographically and culturally from their own (Gruenewald, 2003a, p. 9). Place based education recognizes place as a “primary experiential or educational context,” but Gruenewald (2003a) asserts this idea is “radical because current discourses seek to standardize the experience of students from diverse geographical and cultural places so that they may compete in a global economy” (p. 7). However, place-based educators argue that the study of place “can help increase student engagement and understanding through multidisciplinary, experiential, and intergenerational learning that is not only relevant but potentially contributes to the well-being of community life” (Gruenewald, 2003a, p. 7). Moreover, Theobald (1997) even suggests that educators who possess place-based knowledge provides students with “a chance to re-engender mutual commitment and responsibility to a community, thereby strengthening democracy, and becoming ‘stewards of the intellectual life in their communities’” (p. 114, as cited in Moffa & Stewart, 2018). But because place-based education tends to be more focused on the interactions with space and people and acting together, Gruenewald (2003a) argues if educators want

students to really connect self and place, then they will need to “identify and confront the ways that power works through places” (p. 7).

### **Application of Theory**

Blending critical pedagogy and place-based education strengthens both pedagogical approaches. By attending to the oppression (critical pedagogy) and “the responsibility to conserve and restore our shared environments” (Gruenewald, 2003a, p. 6), a critical pedagogy of place “aims to evaluate the appropriateness of our relationships to each other, and to our socio-ecological places” and “encourages teachers and students to reinhabit their places” in order “to pursue the kind of social action that improves the social and ecological life of places, near and far, now and in the future”(Gruenewald, 2003a, p. 7). By combining the social aspect of critical pedagogy with the ecological aspect of place-based education, we may help to build compassion for the human and ecological condition that will allow “the production of educational discourses and practice that explicitly examine the place-specific nexus between environment, culture, and education” (Gruenewald, 2003a, p. 10). And last, combining critical pedagogy, heavily focused on urban contexts, with the most often rural-centered place-based education pedagogy creates a special space to examine how rural context influences or impacts educators and students in their learning environments.

As Azano & Stewart (2015) suggests, a critical pedagogy of place (Gruenewald, 2003a) provides a framework for teacher educators who “intend to prepare content area teachers to meet the specific needs of rural learners.” By drawing from a critical pedagogy of place (Gruenewald, 2003a) that which examines “the place-specific nexus between environment, culture and education,” (p. 10), this study seeks to understand how teachers conceptualize their own sense of place and how their place identities inform their perceptions of what is effective professional

development. As White and Reid (2008) suggest as “teachers come to know, and know about, a particular rural place, and come to understand its relationships to, and with other places, they [teachers] are developing knowledge, sensitivities, awareness, skills, attitudes, and abilities” for greater success in a rural setting (p. 6). Through examining teachers’ sense of place in relationship to their learning, this study hopes to discover if one’s sense of place influences what teachers perceive as effective professional development and if it influences their decision to implement in the classroom.

### **Defining Professional Development**

Current research on professional development has shown that professional development does not consistently link to strong student learning outcomes (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). A quality education for all students can only be achieved when teachers have access to effective professional development which is incorporated into their instructional practice.

The most recent reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, ESSA (2015) has provided an updated, research-based definition of effective professional development that states professional development must be “sustained, (not stand-alone, 1-day, and short-term workshops), intensive, collaborative, job-embedded, data-driven, and classroom focused” (ESSA, 2015).

A growing body of empirical research has suggested that effective professional development programs have five distinct features that support ESSA of 2015 current definition (Desimone, 2009; Desimone & Garet, 2015; Penuel et al., 2011). To be effective in improving teacher practice and student learning, these core features include the following: (a) *content focus*: the activities are content based and how students learn that content; (b) *active learning*: teachers must be engaged in active learning through observing, sending/receiving feedback, looking at

student work, presenting etc.;

- (c) *coherence*: goals, content and activity must be consistent and in line with the school curriculum and strategic goals, teacher knowledge and beliefs, needs of the students and state reforms and policies;
- (d) *sustained duration*: professional learning must be continuously and include “20 hours or more of contact time”; and last,
- (e) *collective participation*: teachers need professional development activities that allow time for collaboration with grade level, content specific or various professional learning communities (Desimone, 2009; Desimone & Garet, 2015). Support for the five features comes from Garet et al. (2001) cross-sectional studies and longitudinal studies from Desimone et al. (2013) and qualitative studies from Desimone (2009).

Darling-Hammond et al., (2017) review of 35 rigorous studies on professional development revealed a link between professional development, teaching practice and student outcomes. They identified seven core features which significantly aligned with ESSA of 2015 definition of effective professional development. These core features include that professional development is “content focused” (p. v), “incorporates active learning” (p. v), “supports collaboration” (p. v), “uses models of effective practice” (p. v), “provides coaching and expert support” (p. vi), “offers feedback and reflection” (p. vi), and “is of sustained duration” (p. vi). In addition, Learning Forward (2017), the United States professional association for educator training, describes five research-based conditions necessary to nurture a system of learning in every school. These conditions are the framework to generate effective professional development policies and implement powerful practices. The five areas include a shared vision, the use of data to set goals and advance student learning, aligned resources, ongoing leadership development, and sustainable training through effective change management (Learning Forward, 2017).



## **Professional Development in Rural Context**

Today, school district leaders continue to face challenges regarding professional development for teachers because of the changing demographics and isolation that comes with being rural. Johnson, Showalter, Klein & Lester (2014) posits that rural districts “are complex and diverse” and currently serve a varied student population which includes a high number of English learners and students who live in poverty. While rural districts have smaller class sizes and a closer sense of community, rural districts face “limiting funds, lack of resources, geographically isolation, and even social inequalities” (Azano & Stewart, 2015; Reagan et al., 2019). These challenges prevent rural districts from providing optimal professional learning experiences for teachers.

While limited funds and lack of resources contribute to some of the challenges rural districts face, providing effective professional development becomes more complicated by the fact that many rural schools are geographically isolated (Peterson, 2012; Wilson & Ringstaff, 2010). The geographic distance from teacher networks and specialized professional development workshops or programs further exacerbates the isolation many rural teachers feel. Being geographically isolated is just one form of isolation. Teachers in rural settings, where professional development opportunities may be limited due to funding, may find themselves working in professional isolation (Howley & Howley, 2005). Without funding, districts are unable to provide available resources, or the available staff needed to support professional development efforts such as consultants, coaches, and substitute teachers for professional release time (Glover et al., 2016). Even if teachers are able to attend workshops or obtain resources, oftentimes they wear many hats and have multiple grades and subjects to teach making it difficult to collaborate and have on-going learning which can only further isolate teachers.

In addition to being geographically dispersed, the wide-ranging needs of rural teachers often depend on the unique contexts of their individual schools, “making professional development particularly perplexing” (Peltola et al., 2017). Because rural schools are unique in their specific needs, rural teachers need ongoing, flexible professional development that encourages teacher collaboration across the varied professional networks (Eargle, 2013).

### **Rural Teacher Professional Development Models**

Despite some of the systemic challenges to rural professional development, empirical research on rural professional development models have demonstrated varied success with specific professional development approaches used in rural schools.

For example, Barrett et al. (2015) study considered whether content-based professional development positively impacts student achievement scores in rural settings over time. The researchers observed gains the first year, following the intensive content driven training which was funded by The Appalachian Math and Science Partnership, but the gains did not persist into the second and third years. Other researchers examined the impact mentorships have on rural teacher education programs and first year in-service teachers (De La Garza, 2016; Lindenberg et al., 2016). While De La Garza (2016) and Lindenberg et al. (2016) studies found rural teachers welcomed these professional collaborations and viewed mentorships as useful in developing their instructional practice, the mentoring visits were scarce citing budgetary constraints and traveling long distances to rural schools. These two studies point to the ongoing challenges new and in-service teachers face with professional learning in rural areas.

Other research on professional development for rural teachers attended to the delivery mechanism of these learning opportunities, such as online/virtual or long distant learning. Collins

et al. (2016) and Mhishi et al. (2012) exclusively focused their studies on professional development in rural areas in a distant or virtual model. Both studies found that offering professional learning at distant learning facilities (such as universities or educational services) and having a large geographical area to serve made it difficult for rural teachers to access ongoing and timely professional learning. Collins et al. (2016) study utilized speech-pathologists to support and guide professional learning on specific literacy instruction for teachers; however, the in-person professional learning was “frequently itinerant” as these individuals were traveling long distance and spread between districts (Reagan et al., 2019). As a result, they became available to teachers virtually as preliminary results show teachers felt supported. Mhishi et al. (2012) study focused on pedagogically development of rural teachers specifically in a virtual format and found results varied on the “reported helpfulness or implementation” of the virtual-based program and resources, mentioning concerns with access to the internet (Mhishi et al., 2016, as cited in Reagan et al. 2019).

While online or distance learning delivery models provide rural teachers with some success to their professional learning, Hunt-Barron et al. (2015) examined a hybrid approach to professional learning. In this study, researchers utilized a combination of face-to-face professional learning followed by support from online blogs or GoogleSites. They discovered teachers used the online tools primarily to download instructional materials rather than to engage in professional collaboration activities and that while online learning saved travel time, teachers still struggled with the time it took to complete the learning tasks, not to mention the continuous internet connectivity issues (Hunt-Barron et al., 2015). Findings did suggest that face-to-face professional development learning provided teachers with immediate support and the resources “readily available” for teachers to use (Reagan et al., 2019).

Given the different professional learning models with varying degrees of success, these studies demonstrate the need for rural educational leaders to structure professional development activities based not only on teachers' needs and interests but also to consider the mechanism used to deliver high quality professional learning. But even then, researchers have only scratched the surface to discover what it means to provide effective professional development to teachers in rural settings.

### **Rural Professional Development Focused on Place**

A new paradigm of rural teaching grounded in a place-conscious focuses on the particulars of a rural place as more than just fixed or bound by geography but rather place is something more “fluid and provisional” (Reagan et al., 2019, p. 86). The following research studies sought to better understand how rural place and social space plays an intricate part into becoming a rural teacher on pre-service or in-service teachers and to prepare them not just for *anywhere* but for *somewhere* (Reagan et al., 2019, p. 86).

Grounded in Gruenewald (2003a) research, White & Reid (2008) focused on place-conscious teacher preparation programs at an urban Australian university. Pre-service teachers developed familiarity with the place and people of the community and school in ways to help prepare pre-service students for teaching in a rural setting. Researchers concluded that “attention to place could be a key means of expanding the consciousness of student teachers about the *significance* of place, and its relationships to other places and social practices”; thereby, focusing on “the relationships in and between place,” rural pre-service teachers are better equipped to work in areas different from their own (White & Reid, 2008, p. 8-9). Additionally, Somerville et al., (2010) in their longitudinal ethnographic study of rural primary school teachers considered a “place pedagogies approach” that looked at the “characteristics of place as the site of the

intersection of different stories” (p. 43). Researchers found classroom space was a key area in which learning about place and community occur and as such were “intertwined” and that “the process of learning about their [pre-service rural teachers] communities began through the children” in the classroom (Somerville et al., 2010, p. 39).

Reid et al. (2010) looked at the sociocultural constructions of pre-service teachers’ perceptions of teaching and living in a rural place. They argued for rural social space, a theoretical model for understanding rurality which helps prepare teachers to work and to live in rural communities without it reinforcing the deficit model of rural schools and rural life. This rural social space is defined as the “set of relationships, actions, and meanings that are produced in and through the daily practice of people in a particular place and time” (Reid et al., 2010, p. 269). This brings together three related factors, the economy, geography, and demography that are “connected both in practice and in place” (p. 269). It is through these interactions and relationships with the community, the environment, and the culture where teachers find the resources necessary to be effective in a rural context.

Walker-Gibbs et al. (2015) study took it one step further and proposed a “Pedagogy of the Rural” which looked at flipping the conversations from what teachers bring to the rural, to what the rural brings to education. Researchers posit that Pedagogy of Rural examines what it means to be rural and “conceptualizes rural understandings as a pedagogy that is not a pedagogy ‘for’ or ‘about’ but rather ‘of’ the rural” (p. 81). They argued that “an individual’s conceptions and experiences of rurality” (p. 81), influences teachers’ pedagogical decisions rather than what the pedagogy brings to the rural context. In essence, teachers’ daily activities and realities in the rural context are sensitive to what the rural brings to their teaching and as such helps to determine what to do when one doesn’t know exactly what to do (Walker-Gibbs et al., 2017). In

addition, Walker-Gibbs et al. (2015) and Azano & Stewart (2015) raise the issue of identity as another way of coming to know place, claiming that the interaction among personal and professional identities that are shaped by one's upbringing or histories and by a shared rural social space, teachers construct a rural identity "linked to a rural place" (as cited in Reagan et al., 2019). These rural identities or "place identities" and teachers' own histories help to inform their sense of place and thus how it informs their teaching. Therefore, in this study, interviewing teachers on how one's rural identity and upbringing informs their perception on effective professional development can lead researchers into understanding the subtle nuances of living and working in a rural place and what it means to provide professional learning opportunities specific to the needs of rural teachers.

Of course, just knowing a place or having a rural upbringing doesn't guarantee success as a rural teacher. As Somerville et al. (2010) points out, the ways of knowing a place are not fixed and just because one grew up in a rural place doesn't mean problems would not exist. The mere fact of having knowledge of a rural place can prevent one from coming to know that place and thus keep one from coming to know oneself in that place. Reagan et al., (2019) extends this by stating a "sense of place is linked with one's construction of self in that place through conscious and intentional interaction" (p. 87).

As Reagan et al., (2019) literature review on rural teacher education points out that while most studies show pre-service teachers do gain an understanding of the rural context, they continue to "express feelings of unpreparedness for teaching in rural contexts" (p. 91; Azano & Stewart, 2015; Kline & Walker-Gibbs, 2015). This feeling of unpreparedness and uncertainty continues to stymie district leaders and their efforts in providing effective professional development and learning opportunities for rural teachers. It is essential that rural students are

provided high-quality teachers who understand the importance of place, who value students' lived experiences, and work to build appropriate teaching and learning opportunities for all students. To do this, district leaders must provide rural teachers with the right kind of support and professional learning that is specific to the needs of rural schools and communities (Green et al., 2013; Jenkins & Cornish, 2015).

### **Summary**

Professional development is necessary for all teachers and should be used to enhance the environment for a classroom teacher, particularly in a rural setting. It involves educating teachers and helping them to develop their knowledge of effective classroom strategies and instructional practices, to improve their own teaching, and eventually to have beneficial impacts on student achievement. The focus of professional development should be specific and meet the needs of teachers in a rural setting.

The purpose of this chapter is to lay out the findings of a review of the literature relating to the professional development of teachers in rural contexts. It identifies a theoretical lens to critical theory of place. It has discussed what is learned from previous research about the effectiveness of professional development in rural contexts and has drawn on the available literature to highlight the challenges of conducting research in this study.

## Chapter 3 - Methodology

The purpose of this qualitative research was to explore how teachers' sense of place and educational upbringing inform what they perceived to be effective professional development so teachers are more likely to act on this new learning. The research study included five teacher participants, who varied from two to ten years of teaching experience in various fields. All participants lived either in a suburban, urban, and rural community and had varied rural and nonrural background experiences.

### Design and Rationale

This study examined whether teachers' sense of place and educational upbringing bear any influence on their perceptions of effective professional development and whether it informed their decisions to act on this new knowledge. The overarching question was *How do teachers' sense of place and educational upbringing influence their perceptions of effective professional development in a rural setting?* In unpacking this question, the study addressed the following sub-questions:

1. How do teachers in a rural setting perceive building and district level professional development?
2. In what ways does sense of place inform teachers' perceptions of effective professional development?
3. In what ways do these perceptions inform teachers' decisions to act on their new learning?

The goal of the study was to gain insight into what teachers perceived to be the most effective professional development experiences so rural districts can better understand how to integrate



effective professional development for teacher professional growth, retention, and increased implementation in the classroom.

## **Methodology**

To fully address how teachers' perception of place and educational upbringings informs their perceptions on effective professional development, this study employed narrative analysis as a way to help understand how the stories people create represent themselves or their lived experiences in a rural context. Narrative analysis is situated under the umbrella of social constructivism, where the focus is on the individual's learning takes place because of one's interactions in a group. It is this belief individuals learn and develop through participation in social activities in the world. Socio-cultural theory is one part of social constructivism that intertwines our mind and world (Moen 2006, p.57). Vygotsky (1978) leads the way in understanding how we learn and develop as humans and how our social and cultural contexts shape who we are "based on where [we] are at any particular point in time" (Moen, 2006, p. 57). So, to identify what informs teachers' perceptions on effective professional development, there must be a consideration and awareness of how teachers' cultural contexts shape their identities and thus informs their perceptions. Makhail Bakhtin (1981) claims that "understanding and response" are prerequisites for making meaning; and in order for teachers to make meaning from their learning, they need to tend to their own cultural contexts and consider how it might inform their or shape their own learning (Azano & Stewart, 2015). Bahktin's theory of language helps us to understand the complex social interactions that are present every day in schools and in classrooms. His concept of dialogue focuses on "the different voices that interact and that together create meaning and understanding" (Moen 2006, p. 58). It is this meaning that is created when "voices engage in dialogue with each other" and not transferred from one to another. His

concept of heteroglossia, the presences of two or more voices, addresses “the way in which the utterances we construct as we engage in dialogue with one another are colored and shaped by the socially specific environment in which they are crafted and the larger ‘sociological consciousness’” (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 276). Words do not exist by themselves, rather words function in “a tension-filled environment of alien, value judgements and accents” that influence understanding (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 276). Words exist between the contexts the speaker uses them in and the “alien” contexts the receiver brings to that dialogue, where one “cannot excise the rejoinder from this combined context made up of one’s own words and the words of another without losing its sense and tone” (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 284). The complexity of language makes social interactions multidimensional so that teachers and their interactions with each other during professional development and their interactions within their environment helps to inform their perceptions on what they find effective.

It is through narratives, or our stories, where we make sense of our experiences, how we communicate with one another and how we come to “understand the world around us” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 33). As Diaute (2014) explains, “The power of the narrative is not so much that it is *about* life, but that it interacts *in* life” (p. 2, as cited in Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). These interactions or narratives enable researchers to “study teachers and their teaching in movement, in a process of development, and within the teachers’ social, cultural, and institutional settings” (Moen, 2006, p. 59).

For this research study, employing a narrative analysis allowed myself, as the researcher, to examine further the influence place has on teachers and their understanding of what effective professional learning looks and feels like. As Gehart et al. (2007) further posits narrative analysis occurs throughout the research process, meaning there is a focus on the co-construction of

meaning between the research and participants. It is also through narrative analysis that allows the researcher to identify “the relationships that hold between and among” the different themes or categories that may emerge between the teachers and their stories and helps show “how the categories link to one another” (Polkinghorne, 1995, p. 10).

In addition, utilizing a narrative analysis approach especially in rural context not only is necessary but also fills a gap in current research. According to Burton, Brown, and Johnson (2013), in their examination of storylines about rural educators told through published research from 1970s to 2010 revealed that only 27% of the studies on rural teachers they researched relied on qualitative or ethnographic methods, the other 71% of research used surveys as the main data collection—a method which fails to address natural experiences of rural teachers. With a limited range of methods used to study rural teachers, seeking a narrative analysis methodological approach on the experience of rural teachers may help tell different stories about the power of rural educators and their sense of place and how their sense of place informs their perceptions on what is effective professional development.

## **Methods**

The qualitative research methods for this study included an object-elicited response, semi-structured, open-ended interview questions, and a written reflection followed by a final interview. By beginning with an object-elicited response, such as an activity or lesson from a professional development workshop that has been implemented in the classroom, allowed the participants to reflect and speak freely about his or her experiences, successes and challenges in their learning and implementing the activity. It also enabled the researcher to identify key themes or topics as it relates to the participant’s personal upbringing and perception of place that may or may not have influenced their willingness to implement the activity or lesson being shared.

These initial interviews were recorded and transcribed prior to the semi-structure, open-ended interviews.

After collecting data on the object-elicited response, I used this data to develop key questions for the semi-structured, open-ended interviews that focused on the participant's lived experiences growing up either rural or nonrural, their experiences engaged in various kinds of professional development and what if any of those experiences influenced their decisions to implement new learning into the classroom. Utilizing semi-structured, open-ended questions that are "flexibly worded" or having a mix of "more or less" structured interview questions enabled the researcher to respond to the "situation at hand, to the emerging worldview of the respondent, and to new ideas on" how teachers perceive place and its impact on the world around them (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 110). Once the information was audio-recorded and transcribed, participants, if they chose too, were offered a chance to review the recorded transcription, ensuring validity and accuracy of the data.

After participating in professional learning throughout the semester, a follow up to the study included a written response and a final interview to see if sense of place or place informed teachers' reasoning for implementing the activity or lesson learned from current professional development experience. One last consideration and final data collection piece would include participants writing a reflective essay on how their sense of place informs their view of or philosophy of education.

## **Timeline**

The study initially consisted of 16 weeks which allowed time to introduce the study, gain informed consent, set initial interviews, provide professional development learning opportunities, and then allow time for participants to reflect and respond to their learning.

Below provides a suggested timeline of a 16-week research study:

Week 1-2: Initial meeting to describe study, obtain consent and set timeline

Weeks 2-3: Object-elicited interviews – coding and themes

Weeks 4-6: Semi-structure, open-end interviews

Weeks 4-13: Participate in professional development opportunities available or assigned.

Weeks 14-16: Post Interview and written response

### **Modified Research Schedule**

However, due to the delay in finding participants, the research study was shortened by 3 weeks, thus missing the window to the district PD experience. In addition, COVID – 19 was another contributing factor as some of the participants were quarantined during the study, making it difficult to keep to a timeline. and do personalized learning. Because of these variables, participants were given days within each interviewing cycle to select and as well as given the opportunity to decide the location. Table 1 outlines the timeline of the study.

**Table 1**

*Research Calendar*

| <b>Sessions</b> | <b>Start Date</b> | <b>Duration</b> | <b>Agenda</b>                                                                                    |
|-----------------|-------------------|-----------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Week 1 – 2      | Sept 20 – Oct. 1  | 45-60 min.      | Research overview, consent form, and object-elicited interview –Professional Learning experience |
| Week 3 – 5      | Oct. 4 – Oct. 22  |                 | No district led PD; Participants could participate in their own PD                               |
| Week 6          | Oct. 24 – Oct. 29 | 60 min          | Semi-structure, open-end interviews focus on education upbringing and rural experiences          |
| Week 7 – 11     | Nov. 1 – Dec. 3   |                 | No district led PD; Participants could participate in their own PD                               |

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|              |                  |        |                                                            |
|--------------|------------------|--------|------------------------------------------------------------|
| Week 12 - 13 | Dec. 6 – Dec. 18 | 40 min | Sent response questions and follow up with post interview. |
|--------------|------------------|--------|------------------------------------------------------------|

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Due to change in scheduling cycle and the limiting opportunities to attend professional development, the last interview was altered to be more reflective in nature. Participants were asked to reflect on their values and beliefs and how this may or may not influence what and how one teaches. In addition, they were to reflect on professional development as it relates to the rural context. After reviewing the written responses, a follow up interview was conducted to gain insight into the participant's thinking. It allowed me to gather upon the subtle nuances into their responses that may not have been present in the written word.

### **Research Population and Sampling Method**

As a qualitative research study, the best sample selection is non-probability (Creswell 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 96). This approach to sample selection allows the researcher to select a specific population and focus on answering the questions the research supports, “such as discovering what occurs, the implication of what occurs, and the relationships linking occurrences” (Honigmann, 1982, p. 84, as cited in Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 96). With a non-probability selection, as the researcher, I had greater input and used judgment in the selection process, even though not every teacher in the population had an equal chance of participating (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). However, by using non-probability selection sampling, I purposefully (or use purposeful sampling) selected a “sample from which the most can be learned” and thereby acquired the necessary data with breadth and depth (Creswell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The sample of teachers worked at one site: a rural school district defined as distant rural by NCES and had several opportunities over the past few years to attend

a variety of professional development workshops as outlined by ESSA (Desimone, 2009; Desimone & Garet, 2015; Penuel et al, 2011).

The criteria used for the selection process included the following:

- 1) Teachers who are highly certified.
- 2) Teachers who are employed by the research site.
- 3) Teachers who maintain the teacher of record for at least one-home room class in any grade level K-12 and in any content area.

The process of teacher selection began by identifying schools that fall within the distant rural category as defined by NCES. Three districts within driving distant of researcher's residents were identified. Next, I sent an introductory email to each superintendent of schools seeking permission to solicit participants for my study, including the school district for which I am employed (Appendix D). Attached to this email included a letter seeking permission from the superintendent and building level administrators to recruit participants (See Appendix E and Appendix F). Once approved at the district level, letters were then sent to area building administrators at the elementary, middle, and high school levels (Appendix F). My goal here was to be completely transparent and to have the full support of the district and building administrators. A follow up meeting was held for each building principal who approved and signed the letter to review the purpose and design of the study and to answer questions. Once permission was granted, an introductory email with an attached survey was sent out to certified staff (See Appendix G). After four weeks, I only heard back from one district and received little interest from local teachers. Given the strain and stress many educators were feeling, especially during these uncertain Covid-19 times, the decision was made to offer an incentive for participation in the study (Appendix H). A new email was distributed to the building indicating

that their participation would include up to one hundred dollars cash for completion of the study. This provided the opportunity for participants to justify their time spent as well as offered the researcher with a pool of participants to select from. The results yielded five participants.

### **Description of the Participants**

The sample for the study was small to gather meaningful data. The sample selection was purposive, identifying teachers who only taught in schools as defined as distant rural and who taught in public school districts. The sample frame included five teachers from one rural school. These five participants represented all three levels: elementary, middle, and high school. There were two secondary teachers who taught English and the other three participants taught upper elementary students. All five participants varied in teaching experience, professional development experience and educational upbringing. They also ranged from 3 to 25 years teaching experience. It is important to note the researcher was also employed at the same district as all five participants.

Participant A was a middle school English teacher. She taught in the same rural school district she attended as a high school student. Growing up in a Navy family, Participant A traveled all over the states, experiencing a variety of educational settings; however, after her parents divorced, she moved with her mother and siblings back to her mother's small rural community. This is where she graduated from high school. Not far from her mother's family farm, she lived with her children, raising livestock and riding horses. Participant A's experience in education began 21 years earlier, where she spent the first seven years teaching in an urban school district. While she loved teaching in an urban setting, the commute from home to work was too much and so when an opening came available in her current district, she applied. Since



then, she had taught the last 14 years in her current rural district and is very grateful for the educational experiences she has had.

Participant B was an elementary teacher. She grew up in a large suburban area, where she graduated from a suburban high school. She began her teaching career in a suburban school district and discovered after a few years of teaching, it wasn't for her. Shortly after and because of cost of living, she and her husband decided to move to a neighboring rural community where they built a house and raised their family. She began her fifth year of teaching in a rural district and has stayed, making it her 21<sup>st</sup> year teaching in the same rural district and her 25<sup>th</sup> year in education. She has earned her master's degree in counseling.

Participant C was a high school English teacher. She began her teaching career in a suburban school district and left shortly after one year to teach in her current district. She has taught for the last 24 years in the same rural district. As a child, she was raised in rural community and graduated from a rural school district much smaller than the one she currently teaches. She and her husband live just outside the district in a neighboring rural area.

Participant D was an elementary teacher. She grew up in a large suburban school district and still resides in the same area which is thirty minutes from her current employment. Her love for teaching came from her experiences growing up in a family full of educators. Her father is a professor and her mother a principal. It was her time spent attending her mother's school, a small distant rural school where she felt a sense of community not only in the school but also within in the small town. She called the school the "central hub" of the community. Eventually, she started her teaching career in a suburban school district, but after two years, realized she missed the community feeling of a small rural district and decided to change jobs. This is Participant D's 3<sup>rd</sup>

year in the district but her 5<sup>th</sup> year in education. She is completing a master's degree in Curriculum and Instruction.

Participant E was an elementary teacher and is in her third year of teaching in a rural district. As part of Participant E's practicum experience as an undergraduate, she student taught in a rural, suburban, and urban district. Shortly after her student teaching experience in her rural district, Participant E was hired by that same rural district, where she continues to work. She grew up in a large suburban school district, where education was highly regarded, and college was an expectation. While attending college, she met her husband. It was through her experiences attending a small college and being part of her small church group, where she realized that she "thrived" in a small setting. This is the reason she lives with her husband in a neighboring suburban area but commutes thirty minutes to her job. Currently, she is completing her master's degree in Curriculum and Instruction with a focus in reading.

As presented in Table 2 I have identified five participants and their educational upbringing, teaching experience, current degree, and residential placement. While the sample was small, each participant brought different educational experiences and perceptions of what it means to learn and teach in a rural setting. It is interesting to note that while participants vary in age, experience, and educational upbringing, they all identify as White and are all females. It is important to reiterate here that I am not generalizing my findings but rather seeking to understand the relationship between what teachers perceived as effective professional development based on their own sense of place and educational upbringing.

**Table 2***Participant Overview*

| <b>Participants</b> | <b>Education<br/>Upbringing</b> | <b>Grade Level</b> | <b>Rural<br/>Teaching<br/>Experience</b> | <b>Educational<br/>Level</b> | <b>Resides</b> |
|---------------------|---------------------------------|--------------------|------------------------------------------|------------------------------|----------------|
| Participant A       | Urban/Rural                     | Middle School      | 14 years                                 | Bachelors                    | Rural          |
| Participant B       | Suburban                        | Elementary         | 21 years                                 | Masters                      | Rural          |
| Participant C       | Rural                           | High School        | 24 years                                 | Masters                      | Rural          |
| Participant D       | Suburban                        | Elementary         | 3 years                                  | Bachelors                    | Suburban       |
| Participant E       | Suburban                        | Elementary         | 5 years                                  | Bachelors                    | Suburban       |

**Description of Site**

All participants worked in a distant rural school district which is in the Midwest. The school district is located within the town and consisted of two building: a combined middle and high school and an elementary school which is situated less than a mile from the main building but still within the township. The combined middle and high school represent the main hub of the community, where all major social events are held. The elementary qualified as a school wide Title 1 building with 30.1% of its students identified as economically disadvantaged. Currently the district consists of 94% White, 4% Hispanic, with African American and students identified as two or more races at 2% respectively (Kansas Report Card).

**Data Collection and Analysis Procedures**

The study was conducted over a 13-week period. Data was collected from an initial object-elicited response, semi-structured open-ended interview, and a follow up written reflection. Interviews are part of the data collection strategy (Levitt et al., 2018) and play a central role in finding out what is “in or on someone else’s mind” (Patton, 2015, p. 426). Patton (2015) explains

it this way: “We interview people to find out from them those things we cannot directly observe” such as feelings, thoughts, or our intentions and as such “we have to ask people questions about those things” (p. 426). By conducting a face-to-face initial interview with an object-elicited response, I allowed participants to recall feelings or thoughts that they may have had when selecting or developing the activity or lesson and at the same time, I am building mutual trust and rapport with participants. In addition, face-to-face interviews provided the motivation for an engaging and authentic learning experience between participants (Bhattacharya, 2017; Son & Simonian, 2016). Each interview was held at the participant’s choice of location. By allowing the participants to select their own interview location, it allowed the participants to maintain confidentiality and be comfortable in their own surroundings. Four of the five participants decided to interview after school hours and in their classrooms. The fifth participant elected to interview in her favorite coffee shop not too far from her residence.

Prior to each interview, participants were reminded their participation was voluntary and if they had any questions prior to the interview, we would address them. All interviews were recorded using a Voice Recorder app from an electronic device, such as the researcher’s iPhone. After each recorded interview, the researcher saved and submitted the recording to a secure file in google docs. After each interview, a member check occurred with each participant to review the questions and answers. Using member checking helped to verify interpretations and conclusions drawn from the researcher’s notes or from the interview (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 246). In his book *Qualitative Research Design: An Interactive Approach*, Maxwell (2005) explains member checking as “the single most important way of ruling out the possibility of misinterpreting the meaning of what participants say and do and the perspective they have on what is going on, as well as being an important way of identify your own biases and

misunderstanding of what you observed” (pp. 126-127). This was paramount in my research design because the bias and assumptions I have about rural experiences may emerge in my interpretations or analysis. It was best to have these checks and balances. Moreover, it also created opportunities to ask probing and clarifying questions, digging deeper into the data, and ultimately reaching data saturation.

The initial interview was transcribed and coded looking for initial keywords, themes, or phrases to categorize the data. Based on the initial coding, I used these to guide the second interview that consisted of semi-structured, open-ended interviews. Originally, the third interview was to be conducted after teachers’ have participated in some professional development workshops, where I intended to look for any new key words or themes that emerged based on the different types of professional learning teachers were engaged in. Unfortunately, due to time constraints, scheduling and having to move planned district and building led professional development because of Covid-19 related concerns, participants were unable to attend building or district led professional development between their second and third interviews. Professional learning did occur through college coursework and workshops for only two of the participants. As a result, the third interview was modified to a written response where participants reflected on their own values and beliefs about teaching in a rural setting with a follow up interview to clarify and enrich the participants’ responses (See Appendix C).

## **Data Analysis**

Data analysis process followed Creswell’s (2013) data analysis spiral with the four steps: (a) organize the data; (b) read through the data and write memos; (c) interpret the data; and (d) represent the data. First, I took the time to become familiar with all the data shared by the participants. After the last interview, I went through all the transcripts, sorting and organizing

them by timeline and ensuring the audios and all notes were organized. The next step, I read through each transcript holistically to get an idea of each participants' perceptions. In addition, I listened to and made notes of each audio recording, ensuring the accuracy of the original transcripts. For the final step in interpreting the data collection, I began coding. Creswell (2013) suggests researchers look for codes that provides possible information, which is expecting, surprising, or interesting. Using descriptive and emotional coding, I analyzed the data several times. It is at this point; I became completely engrossed into the coding of the data and identifying categories within each transcript. In addition, I identified codes in the participants' written responses and linked them back the codes found in the interview transcripts. It is here, I had to take a step back and reflect on what themes were emerging and how they were developing across the data. Merriam & Tisdell (2016) suggests looking at these individual "data bits" as "trees" and that all these trees make up the "forest" which are those themes (p. 208). By imaging codes of data being parts of a bigger whole, it allowed me to see how naturally themes were emerging.

Five major themes materialized from the data collection: (a) professional development challenges; (b) complex community relationships; (c) teacher connectivity to rural students; (d) teacher perceptions; and (e) connecting to professional development. Table 3 provides the coding information used to gather the findings. The column to the right displays an example or examples found in the data collection. From the codes, categories were created and in turn helped to establish the themes. Table 3 includes a small sampling of codes.

**Table 3***Code Map Sample*

| <b>Themes</b>                        | <b>Categories</b>                                   | <b>Example Data (Codes)</b>                                                                         |
|--------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Professional Development Challenges  | District Limitations                                | There's always the money issue.                                                                     |
|                                      | Geographic Concerns                                 | I could have more time to focus deeply on our learning.                                             |
|                                      | Covid Implications                                  | We haven't done a lot because of Covid.                                                             |
| Teacher connection to rural students | Personal histories bridge connections with students | The biggest thing that helped me was my own personal experiences growing up in the school district. |
|                                      | Personal histories enrich Connections with students | I can show them a wider perspective because I was raised in a very similar manner to my students.   |
| Complex Community Relations          | Teacher - Community                                 | Just the closeness of community in rural setting.                                                   |
|                                      | Teacher-Student                                     | Invested parents who are willing to help you                                                        |
| Teacher perceptions on PD            | reflective of our rural students                    | Overly broad; not based on rural                                                                    |
|                                      | teacher's beliefs on the rural context              | Hmm. how does rural influence me?                                                                   |
| Connecting with PD                   | Applicable                                          | Meaningful and applicable to my classroom                                                           |
|                                      | Engaging                                            | It's got to be engaging. I learn best when it is                                                    |
|                                      | Reflective                                          | You have to be able to have that time to reflect                                                    |

## **Qualitative Validity and Reliability**

Understanding the validity and reliability of qualitative research means paying attention and ensuring the credibility of the study and results (Maxwell, 2005). To do this, Maxwell (2005) and Glesne (2006) together offer ten possible strategies that could help to elevate concerns of validity. Those include the following: long-term fieldwork, rich data, participant feedback, intervention, searching for negative or discrepant cases, triangulation, quasi-statistics, comparison and Glesne (2006) adding peer review and external audit (p. 37-38). For my study, I used rich data in reporting my results; this required that I provide in-depth and detailed portions of interviewees' words, making it a more truthful representation of what they said and meant. In addition, allowing participants to provide feedback on the written transcripts of their interviews ensured each participant verifies and concludes that the answers to the questions were in fact accurately and fairly representative of what was said and meant. This process of data collection and analysis provided triangulation and added validity and reliability of the data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

## **Limitation of the Research Design**

This qualitative study, through a critical theory of place lens, addressed teachers' perceptions of effective professional development and the implications of those perceptions to act in the classroom. This section describes the specific limitations of the study. These include:

1. Participation was voluntary and those choose to participate were carefully identified through close social networks, ensuring they met the necessary parameters (experience, upbringing, and age are possibilities) and were willing participants in the study. Participants ranged from five to twenty-five years of teaching experience and came from a variety of rural, suburban, or urban backgrounds, this allowed the



researcher to further deepen how sense of place and cultural contexts informed teachers' perceptions on effective professional development.

2. The participant pool came from the same rural district, including the researcher.
3. Even though the researcher had full access to the research site, there were time constraints as to when teachers could meet during the school day or before or after school.
4. District and building led professional development opportunities were not available between the second and third interview cycle.
5. Number of participants in the pool size was relatively small, which could introduce some form of bias into the research findings.
6. Using open-ended interview questions and the utilization of object-elicited responses to spur reflection relied on the participant's honesty and detailed accounts of those experiences.

However, using in-depth narrative analysis allowed the researcher to understand the experience being shared and obtain information that "people do not consciously know themselves," thus creating a rich and detailed study (Bell, 2002).

### **Positionality**

As the researcher, I am the primary means for data collection and analysis. My rural upbringing, middle working-class experiences, as well as my gender-a female and my racial identity-White, together with lived experiences in a rural setting, influence my views and the assumptions I make regarding rural education, rural teachers, and rural communities. While I was raised in a rural, predominantly farming community and had a family that provided for my basic needs, I am aware of the effects of poverty experienced by some of my high school

classmates and the impact of living in a low socio-economic community. Like for most other schools serving rural working-class students, educational experiences were, for the most part, adequate rather than empowering. Many of my classmates, while some were first-generation college attendees, returned after graduating to attend to the farm, marry and start a family.

As a female, I was discouraged by my extended family and some teachers from attending college and was thought to be a better fit to stay home, tending to the family and farm. Fortunately, my mother and father (who was first in his family to graduate from college), encouraged all my siblings and I to attend college and to experience a world outside of the lived experience on the farm. My sister and I were the only two who went on to college. She met and married her husband soon after and held off completing her degree until much later. I, on the other hand, left for college and never returned home.

Early on, I felt a sense of academic inadequacy and discomfort in the world of higher education. This discomfort and of course, the assumptions and bias surrounding rural education, drove me not only to complete my degree but to continue post-graduate work. It was an escape from those assumptions and biases that held me back as a person and as an educator. Of course, what I learned was that my rural roots are linked to my identity. The physical geography of the place—plains, creeks, lakes, and farmlands—richly defined my childhood. A sense of family, strong community connections, and a pride in taking care of “one’s own” are a part of living in a rural community and contributes to my personal identity with place.

These lived experiences will connect well with my participants, rural educators, who I closely identify with and who, if not keenly aware of, can influence my own reactions and interaction with the participants. My topic focus is on teachers’ sense of place and their perceptions of place that inform what they perceive to be effective professional learning for rural

educators. As Director of Teaching and Learning for a rural school district that serves over 800 students, 80 staff members and is predominately white, middle-class community, I am charged with providing engaging and authentic professional learning experiences. I must recognize how my lived experiences and assumptions will contribute to my interactions and reactions with rural educators, and how these interactions will shape and inform my data collection. Having the lived experiences similar to my participants will allow me to be viewed as a trusted “insider” yet will also allow me the outside perspective needed. Just as it is important to be a trusted researcher, it will be equally as important to maintain validity and to continue to assess my own assumptions and bias throughout the process either by reflective journaling or through introspection. Whatever vehicle I use to clarify my bias and identify any assumptions, my connection, and experiences to living in a rural community and my own sense of place cannot be overlooked.

### **Summary**

In summary, Chapter 3 outlines the research design and rationale, methodology, methods, data collection, limitations, and the researcher’s positionality that addresses any potential bias to the study. This research is a narrative analysis study designed to use critical theory of place as a lens to reveal how teachers’ sense of place and educational upbringing informs their perceptions on effective professional development and whether this new-found awareness informs their decision to act on new knowledge in the classroom. Narrative research is identified as the perfect fit for this study because it allows the opportunity for different stories to be told about the power of place and its influence on rural teachers and their perceptions on effective professional development.

## **Chapter 4 - Data Analysis and Results**

### **Introduction**

As designed, this qualitative study involved understanding how one's sense of place and educational experiences plays a part in determining what one perceives is or is not effective professional development. After interviewing each participant, I analyzed the data to identify and describe teacher's perceptions on effective professional development and the role sense of place and educational upbringing influenced those perceptions. Analysis of this data may help inform superintendents, professional development directors and building administrators how to integrate professional development that is meaningful and purposeful for rural teachers and their students. This chapter includes the findings from the research in detail and as it relates to the three guiding research questions.

Findings provided insight into teachers' perceptions of effective professional development and to what degree sense of place influenced their understanding of what is effective or not effective professional development for teaching in a rural setting. The research study derived from literature which described a problem providing rural teachers with engaging and meaningful professional development. The main purpose of this research was to share the stories of rural teachers and to explore how their sense of place and educational upbringing may have influenced what they see as effective learning opportunities.

The findings of this study revealed five major themes from the data: (a) professional development challenges; (b) complex community relationships; (c) teacher connectivity to rural students; (d) teacher perceptions; and (e) connecting to professional development. The summary

of findings in this section is the culmination of different stories and examples shared from the interviews. The findings were:

1. Most participants recognized the challenges districts face providing professional development for rural teachers.
2. Most participants acknowledged educational upbringing and experiences in rural setting influenced their sense of readiness teaching rural students.
3. Most participants acknowledged complex community relationships existed in rural school districts, making teaching, and learning unique to the rural environment.
4. Most participants acknowledged effective professional development needed to align to students' needs but did not consider rural context as it applied to their own learning.
5. Participants acknowledged effective professional development needed to be applicable, engaging, and reflective without consideration to the rural context.

### **Presentation of the Data and Results**

The research drew from the participants' stories, educational experiences, and their own perceptions of teaching and learning as it related to professional development in a rural setting. Overall, the participants agreed that districts face challenges when it comes to offering effective professional development and that the participants' experiences and upbringing does influence how teachers approach teaching in the classroom. In this section, the research is organized by research question, its themes, and then by categories.

## Research Question 1

How do teachers in a rural setting perceive building and district level professional development? The study demonstrated that most participants felt while district and building led professional development is a key part of the learning experience and necessary to meet district initiatives, there are significant challenges when it comes to delivering effective professional development. Research question one correlates to the first finding: Most participants accepted and recognized the challenges districts faced when providing professional development for rural teachers.

### Challenges with Rural Professional Development

The findings relate to the theme of challenges with in rural professional development. Within this theme lies three categories: (a) district limitations; (b) geographical isolation; and (c) Covid-19 implications. Each participant shared feelings of concern yet understanding of the challenges districts faced when providing effective professional development.

**District Limitations.** As Hunt-Barron, Tracy, Howell, & Kaminski (2015) and many other researchers have shared, lack of funding and resources continue to challenge rural school districts and their professional development efforts (Howley & Howley, 2005; Lynch, 2000; Marlow & Cooper, 2008; Rude & Brewer, 2003). This mirrors what four of the five participants shared in their stories. The fifth participant didn't prioritize funding as a limitation to receiving effective professional development.

Participant A explained that while money was a concern, the biggest frustration and drawback of "being in rural school is that you don't have as many resources to reach out to." She explained even though her earlier teaching experiences in a much larger school district had similar concerns with money and how it was "tight," she still had the advantage of reaching out

to others because it was a “big school and a big staff where [they] could trust each other.” Upon reflecting, Participant A sighed, “Sometimes I wish I had more resources and more people to reach out to.”

Participant B shared that being in a rural district there is “always the money issue” when it comes to providing professional development. She explained how funding changed over time in her school district and how this impacted resources:

When I came to this district, they had far more money than the [suburban district] I used to work at. I even got a huge raise. Now, this is not the case anymore. Things have really changed over time. And I think we were growing when I came. We used to have four sections of every grade level and now we have one, you know, and so we've lost kids.

We had twenty, twenty-two, twenty-three kids and now we don't. So that tax base shifted and so funding has definitely shifted.

In reflection, Participant B shared it might be “more normal that you have less money at the smaller schools” even though earlier on in her career, it wasn't the case. She did indicate that most professional learning she experienced was time spent with the team:

You know, I would say we do more of what we do as a team on our own, just whether it's looking for new materials or different ways of teaching versus going out and listening to somebody else. There was not a lot [learning] through workshops or professional learning, just more working with my team to figure out what we need.

Participant C expressed that “I believe money is a big thing...Money just for things you know, or money even for like professional development” so that you can go “to workshops.” She continued, “I just think the money is not always there.” Participant C shared that over the years teachers were “never really encouraged” to seek professional learning:

They want[ed] us [teachers] to spend money on it. So, I would say if you asked any of us old timers here, they're going to tell you we just haven't done a lot of work [professional development]. It was never encouraged because they [the district] didn't want to pay for it.

Participant E commented that professional development is limited based on “funding.” She explained, “I know in some bigger districts the teachers get like a budget that they get to spend classroom supplies every year. And it felt like there's just not money to do that” in smaller school districts. She further explained how limited resources such as lacking mentors or having limited opportunities to observe or be observed has hindered her professional growth:

I feel like I am not growing as much as I could be because there are just not as many resources here. Like I technically do still have a mentor, but it wasn't as rigorous and supportive as I specifically needed. And so that would be, I think, the biggest downfall teaching here. There it's not as many resources for me to rely on and used to be able to become a better teacher.

**Time and Compliance.** Four of the five participants noted current professional development opportunities did not provide time to reflect or act on new learning as another limitation to effective professional development. One participant added that most professional development is done out of compliance.

Participant D expressed how most professional development opportunities miss a key part of the learning process. She explained that “sometimes PD [professional development] gets missed where it's like, you have, you know, you're in training all day and you're in something and you don't have that time to just make it your own.” She stated, “I wish I could have more time to focus deeply on this, but you know, we have other things to accomplish.” Other things



she mentioned include required state and district trainings and additional trainings on district initiatives that take up a good amount of professional development time.

Participant E looked at time as an issue when it relates to using professional learning within the classroom. Participant E shared,

In regard to professional learning, you have to be able to have that time to reflect and think, OK, how can I actually use this in my classroom? How can I take this piece of information and make it useful for the students?

She continued in stating that most professional development “front load[s] a lot of work at the beginning and we just don't have the time” to really go deep or apply what we are learning in the classroom. She lamented, “I want to do it, but there's just not enough time or I feel pressured that we have to get through all of these math lessons, get through all of the reading and go by the book every day.”

However, Participant B believed professional development for most teachers only occurs if the district provides the opportunity. When asked about her experiences, she shared:

I mean, if I'm being honest, if it [professional development] is not through the district, it's probably not going to happen. You know, I mean, and probably for a lot of us, especially people that still have kids. I think if it [professional learning] isn't part of our duty day or duty expectation for a lot of people, it's not going to happen realistically.

Participant B further noted that professional development is more about compliance; it is something that must be done:

I think you learn a little bit from all of it [professional development] and a lot you don't. A lot that you don't usually just it's just what you do. You have to do it. So, I mean, it's more of a there's not a lot of good professional development that we're getting .... just

because it's the nature of the information. You know, you're not going to be enthralled about testing. I mean, it's the nature of it.

Participant B later added that most professional development required by the district isn't as meaningful, so teachers must pick the "best of the bad":

I think that a lot of times the choices are really you're given that you've got to pick the best of the bad. I mean, like a lot of times and I understand the district choices are choices that they have. We have to do these things. And so obviously things we have to do. What do I do?

**Geographical Limitations.** Azano & Stewart (2015) Reagan et al., (2019) and Howley & Howley (2005) have noted geographical isolation as a challenge for rural districts when it comes to providing professional learning experiences for teachers. This geographical isolation makes it difficult for teachers to build teacher networks and attend content specific professional development workshops (Howley & Howley, 2005; Hunt-Barron, et al., 2015). Two of five participants discussed how isolation affected their need for support and opportunity for professional learning, while two participants shared their thoughts on how technology does or does not bridge those connections.

Participant A shared how she struggled to find the support she needed to work with a particular student behavior. She exclaimed, "It's frustrating when I go for help and there is no one to help. I think that's one drawback of being in a rural school, is that you don't have as many resources to reach out to." Reflecting on her experiences in a larger school compared to a rural school, Participant A added,

I love learning. I love it. And I look at professional development as a way to learn because having been in a large district, there are so many people there and so many

different opportunities. And sometimes I feel being in a small school, I'm so grateful that I had the experience of the large school because at times I feel very isolated.

Participant C referred to the expense of traveling because of the distance in attending workshops or other learning experiences. She stated, "it's not always feasible to travel or get expensive speakers and stuff." Participant C did state that many times teachers would "rely on each other" for their professional learning. She likened to "in-house" professional development. For example, Participant C shared connecting cross curricular, like working with the social studies department or the music department, is a way to share ideas and teaching strategies with teachers in other departments. In her perspective, this collaboration becomes her professional development. At the same time Participant C exclaimed that "finding technological ways to connect with people that have different viewpoints and good resources for us is important to do in a rural area." Making connections through technology can help bridge that geographical distance.

While Participant C referenced technology as a way to help with connect learning, Participant E felt technology, such as professional networks via Twitter or Facebook, was something she "kind of" used "but not really for the most part" despite the limited opportunities she had to engage in shared learning this past year.

**Implications Covid-19 on Teacher Learning.** While initially the research question did not include implications of Covid-19 on teacher learning and experiences with professional development, three of the five participants shared how Covid-19 impacted their desire for learning and their opportunities to learn new content.

Participant A shared her gratitude for those who plan professional development but also recognized how hard it has been to learn during a pandemic:

I know there's a lot of work that goes into it. And I appreciate the people from somewhere else coming in to share with us. But like, I would love to get to start implementing what I'm doing. But there are times when I just feel like I'm, especially in Covid, that I just feel like I'm surviving.

When asked about her experiences in the past with professional development, Participant B shared her experience over the last few years had been limiting: “Well, I mean, the last couple of years we haven't done a lot because of Covid. Honestly, I'm not certain [of how much] just because of you know, I can't remember what was covered in Covid and what we did. It blurs.”

Participant C shared that during the Covid pandemic, it had been difficult to connect with students and to learn while wearing masks:

I think I can speak personally for myself. My attitude has been that I could just say it's been bad. I mean, I can say that it's been bad. I told my husband before the school year started this is the first year that I'm not excited to go back. And that kind of made me feel sad because every year in August, I'm like, yeah, so ready to start again. But just after last year and wearing masks all year and for me it was different. I'm glad we were in masks last year. I think it was important, but it was draining.

Participant C shared how hard it had been this year trying to connect with her students, especially her sophomores. She explained, “My sophomores, I don't know them” at all and because of wearing the masks, “it was hard to get a read on them and see their faces. It was just draining.” And the one thing she has learned about herself, “especially in the last few years, and what with my teaching, it's 100 percent about connection with the kids because, you know, with the pandemic and the distance and masks, it's had an effect.”

## Research Question 2

In what ways does sense of place inform teachers' perceptions of effective professional development? The second interview included questions that focused on teachers' perceptions of teaching rural students, their sense of preparedness teaching rural students, whether through their professional development learning experiences or shared personal histories influence what they perceive as effective professional learning. Research question two correlates to the second, third and fourth findings of the study:

- Most participants acknowledged educational upbringing and experiences in rural setting influenced their sense of readiness teaching rural students.
- Most participants acknowledged complex community relationships existed in rural school districts, making teaching, and learning unique to the rural environment.
- Most participants acknowledged effective professional development needed to align to students' needs but did not consider rural context as it applied to their own learning.

### **Influence of Personal Histories.**

Research has revealed growing up rural does not mean problems do not exist nor having personal knowledge of a rural place or rural upbringing mean one will experience success in a rural setting (Azano & Stewart, 2015; Kline & Walker-Gibbs, 2015; Mukeredzi, 2016; Somerville et al., 2010). However, many of participants in this study felt in one way or another their shared rural experiences influenced their teaching. The findings relate to the theme entitled *Influence of personal histories*. Two categories emerged within this theme: (a) shared personal

histories that bridge connections with students, and (b) personal histories help to enrich students' learning.

**Shared Personal Histories Bridge Connections with Students.** Three of the five participants felt a connection, a sense of closeness and understanding, teaching rural students. Their experiences growing up rural and having a rural background contributed to their perceived connections with students.

Participant A shared stories about growing up as a Navy kid and how her experiences traveling and living in larger cities had influenced her love for learning. Later in her life, she returned home to the family farm where she raised her children and taught in the same community.

Participant A recalled,

I had the good fortune to be a “Navy” kid. That meant we moved where my dad was stationed: large cities. I like to say that “I never had a tap root,” like my own children did.

They were born and raised in rural [community]. I love country living, but I feel like I had the best of both worlds and that I have a great deal to share with my students.

When asked about connecting to rural students' background in their learning, Participant A responded, “I try, but I also know that I value my living around different places” and to “think that they [students] can live in a bubble, it bothers me.”

Although Participant B grew up in a suburban area, most of her time was spent living and raising a family in a rural community, where she felt connected and relatable to her students. Oftentimes she expressed that having shared cultural backgrounds made it easier for her to connect with students: “I mean, I think it makes my life easier.”

Participant B continued,

You know, as a teacher, I don't have to worry about second language. I don't have to worry about ethnic, you know, different differences, cultural things that could create issues, you know, just speak of, whether it's lack of understanding or miscommunication. We're all just kind of similar people. And so, it definitely makes my life easier.

Participant B provided an example when she worked in an urban school district and how uncomfortable the experience was because of that lack of familiarity:

You know, for my master's in counseling, my practicum was up in inner city school during the summer school, high school kids that didn't want to be there. And so, it was a very different feel for me. It was not comfortable, you know, and it just because it was different. It wasn't what my experience was like.

Participant C grew up in a rural community and shared how her personal experiences helped to connect with students:

The biggest thing that helped me was my own personal experiences growing up in a rural school district and having the parents I have and having the mentality that I had helped me to associate better with the kids here [in a rural district]. But I can't honestly say if back then, if I had come from like inner city school district and walked into a rural district, it would have been a big culture shock.

Participant C continued to add that coming from a rural district allows her to “be very careful” about how she goes “about things.” She explains I know when not to “push the envelope sometimes but I do try to do as much as I can.” She is reminded that “always in the back of my mind, you have to be respectful of the moral values and viewpoints of where you are because it's sometimes not always perfectly in line [with your own].”

**Personal Histories Enrich Teacher-Student Connections.** While three of the participants identified how their similar educational upbringing and personal histories connected to their students' lives, most of the participants shared how these experiences, whether the same or different, worked to enrich their teacher-student connections and their student learning.

Participant A valued living in different places and traveling as a Navy kid. She would often use her experiences to instill these experiences into her students: "So I grab literature from this and that, of this culture and this nationality. And I do all that because and, you know.... I think, I think it's important for them to see outside of their little Midwest County." As she stated earlier, it bothered her that her students would live in this "bubble," especially as she reflected on her own children experiences growing up in a rural area and how they never thought outside their small rural community.

While Participant C discussed how being raised rural helped her connect with rural students, she also explained how it provided a unique perspective that allowed her to connect with students through their learning. She shared the following:

When I am teaching writing, I always tell my students that it is best to write about what you know or love, because you have more knowledge and more inspiration. I grew up in a rural area and went to school in a district much smaller even than [this district]. I think it gives me a unique perspective because I understand the dynamics at play. Although I loved living in a small town and going to a small school, there are negatives as well. I felt strongly that it was important to get out and experience the rest of the world. That influences my teaching because I try hard to show my students a variety of topics in order for them to see other perspectives and not just the insular atmosphere that they are used to. For example, my senior English Composition class does a poetry unit every year. I



expose them to a wide variety of poets, including different genders, ethnicities, and time periods. We discuss how those lenses influenced or colored their writing and how important it is that everyone has a voice, so that readers can see themselves.

She concluded by stating,

I think that my understanding of small towns helps me to be more tolerant and understanding. Small communities can be very conservative, insular, and intolerant. My politics and my beliefs are often different. It is not my job or my place to influence students to believe what I believe. However, I can show them a wider perspective and because I was raised in a very similar manner to my students, I can understand and see their perspective without judgement.

Participant C provided an example of teaching the book *Hate List* and shared how her students would get “caught up discussing gun control (or lack thereof),” which can be “tricky because oftentimes in rural areas, students have parents that are pro 2nd amendment and don’t like gun control because they feel it infringes on their freedoms.” However, she continued, “having grown up in a rural area, I have had family members that hunt and have guns and understand that perspective. It helps me to be able to navigate that difficult subject and connect with my students.”

Participant D, who grew up and attended a suburban school district, acknowledged that her experiences were very different from her students. However, this did not inhibit her ability to connect with students. She reflected that “having taught rural students for about 5 years” she sees herself “teaching content that both pertains to their [students] own experiences and broadens their world view and background knowledge.” She shared an example when teaching animal life cycles: “I know my students have many personal experiences with animals from living on farms.

So, using their own expertise allows me to engage them [students] in the content and show that their own experiences have inherent value.” Of course, Participant D expressed expanding students’ “background knowledge about the world around them as well” is equally important.

Participant E, who lived in a suburban area and attended a large school district shared even with limiting rural experiences, she made connections by making learning relevant and relatable: “I try to make learning where it's relevant to their lives” whether that means connecting it with “whatever they're doing on the farm or not.” Participant E later explained, “If kids can't make connections, they're not going to learn anything, so I try to make as much as I can get them to make those connections and talk about things to be able to make those connections.” For example, Participant E shared when reading about the government, it was easy to connect to the local government and link it to the town’s celebration days they have every year.

### **Complex-Community Relationship**

Four of the five participants discussed the complexity of rural community relationships and how it played a part in their teaching. The findings relate to the theme entitled *Complex-community relationships*. Two categories emerged within this theme: (a) teacher-community relationship, and (b) community that lies within the classroom.

**Teacher-Community Relationship.** Participant B reminisced how years before in her building teachers remain teaching for several years and parents were very involved. She explained that it was just part of the culture in her small town:

I think more than anything, it builds culture. It's building connectedness. Things that we used to have and don't. Things change over time and people leave and you lose that unless you are really working towards that [connectedness].

When asked if she believe that her community still has this connectiveness, she explained, “There are a lot of teachers who stayed for a long time because of the feel of community. The town it was just smaller, and you got to know people better. But now, it’s changed some.”

Participant B added parent involvement was key but how much they are involved with their students’ learning and with the school, well this could “go either way.” However, she added parents “are very invested and involved in the school and the community” and because of this “you get to know the parents and you get to know the families, which is definitely helpful” when getting to know your students. She concluded by explaining that knowing your parents and your community, “you’re able to be more in tune and connected with the families and some background knowledge that you might not have somewhere else.”

Participant C expressed working in a smaller community and teaching in a rural district can be “good and bad because you have that support system, and everyone knows you.” But because “you [teachers] have that support system, and everyone knows you, there are drawbacks such as people being in your business all the time, and there is not a variety of people to choose from to be friends with.” However, participant C admitted that while there may be drawbacks to a smaller community, having a community that “is close knit and supportive” enabled her to connect with her students “on a deeper level.”

Participant D shared that the benefit of teaching in a rural area is “just the closeness of community in a rural setting.” Having “strong ties with their families,” students and parents are involved and close with each other and the school. She continued to share how a school is like a train hub:

A small school is like integral to that community. It’s kind of like the train station and, you know, everyone came and got something from the school or needed something

or donated something. And when I went to a larger district, it didn't feel like the school was as big a part of that community. This is why I like rural areas because it feels more like the school is a central hub of a town.

When asked about parental involvement, Participant D expressed parents want to be involved and are involved but “we also have to understand our clientele.” She added “many parents work long hours” or have two jobs and they “are not necessarily there for their child at the end of the day. And so, “we [teachers] have to also think about what expectations are we putting on” students and parents.

Participant E shared her love for the community feel that is often found in a rural school district. She added, “I thrived in the small setting, small school setting. I loved it so, that's why I'm teaching at a small school now because I love it” even though she lives in suburban area. When asked to expound on this “love,” Participant E shared small schools create a community feel which makes it more “personable” and where you can establish better “relationships” with students and their parents. However, Participant E admitted that in small communities, “Everyone knows each other and is up in everyone's business all the time.” For example, she lamented, “Some of the other teachers that do live in the community, they know those things” about their neighbors or what is going on in the community so there is “that sort of disconnect” for her because she does not live in the community:

It's very clear that I am an outsider because I don't know, you know, all the different family things and who can sit with you, who can talk with you and not being in the same room. So just that sort of disconnect, like I'm a part of the community because I am here everyday teaching in school, but I'm not that much a part of the community where I'm here on the weekends and living here in that sense.

Yet, Participant E countered, there are “days I wish I was in the community just because of that community feel.”

**Sense of Community Lies within the Classroom.** Three of the five participants discussed how sense of community and connectedness with students, parents and teachers filtered into the classroom setting.

Participant B shared a benefit of having a close-knit community is that “you get those invested parents, and they definitely are willing to help you” with their students. She continued, “the knowledge you gain, you understand more about why this kid is acting this way, because you know more about the family, because it's small.” Those small community relationships and connections teachers make with parents, “helps you better meet needs” of the students in the classroom.

Participant C described that in a small rural school, “we have just really nice kids here. And I think that's a tribute to a lot of things” such as “good parents and a good community.” According to Participant C, having those connections with parents and students and “if you're willing to establish a relationship with them,” students are “willing to work with you” and parents are supportive of this.

Participant D discussed how shared sense of community found in a small town reflects in her classroom and guided her instructional approaches:

Because rural students have a very strong sense of community, a much stronger sense of community than I grew up with. They know everybody and they can tell you the whole family trees of people. And they're very welcoming and open in a way that a lot of like suburban kids are a little bit more closed off and because of this, they're just more open to you and to what you bring to the table.

This shared sense of community found within her classroom allowed Participant D to try new strategies and activities that built on this attribute:

I have often found teaching strategies like cooperative learning, project-based learning, and classroom discussion to be highly effective and engaging for my students. I believe that rural students benefit from these teaching methods because of their sense of community and resilience. Students in rural communities often have many shared experiences with other students in class as they live in smaller communities. Thus, they are more likely to engage in cooperation with their peers and I can use this skill to engage them in the learning process.

### **Rural Perceptions on Professional Development.**

Most participants expressed professional development, while helpful, needed to fit the complexity of the classroom and the developing needs of rural students and not just address the masses. As well, most participants agreed the rural context was not a consideration when it came to their own learning. The findings related the theme entitled *Rural perceptions on professional development*. Two categories emerged within this theme: (a) professional development not reflective of rural students' needs, and (b) teacher's perception of place and their professional development needs.

**Professional Development not Reflective of Our Rural Students.** When asked about professional development meeting the needs of rural students, three of the five participants felt professional development addressed more the masses and never really considered the rural context, while two of the participants felt professional development met the needs of their students yet never considered the rural context.

Participant C responded that professional development has been “pretty generic,” and that professional development focused on rural students’ needs hasn’t “been specifically looked at that.” She further explained,

I don't even remember a time when it's been specifically, ‘Hey, we're doing this to focus on the needs of a smaller school district.’ I don't think we've ever done anything like that. So, I mean, I would love to. I don't know what that is, but I would love to see that. I think we just keep things general and maybe that needs to happen. Maybe we need to get more specific.

Participant D shared that professional learning can be “overly broad sometimes and it makes generalizations” that what students in a suburban district experience is like what rural students encounter. She explained that sometimes you have to keep it broad because “you don't know who your clientele is. But it would be nice to know that if I am working with a rural district, I should probably take these things into account or understand my own bias, and I'd kind of be able to turn that on and off.” Overall Participant D felt “most professional development is more for like middle school and high school and it is more centered on just the suburban model. It's not as based on rural.” But if professional development was “more detailed and more like explicit towards a certain content area or context [based on rural elementary setting], it is more meaningful for the teachers involved in those workshops.” She concluded, “it’s just like teaching, the more explicit we can be, the more detailed we can be” the better the professional development.

Participant E responded that she takes professional development “with a grain of salt.” She explained, “like with anything you do, if it’s not going to be directly applicable to my students, I’ll do with it what I can, making it actually doable” for my students. And when

addressing rural students' needs, Participant E acknowledged that it was difficult to determine what was a rural issue versus a kid issue to even consider if professional development was addressing or not addressing rural issues. She could not say if what she is seeing in the classroom relates to rural concern or just a general student concern. She stated,

It's hard to say what is a rural issue versus just a general kid issue because there's a lot of kids in my room who I can tell don't get the attention they need at home. So, I feel like I am providing a lot of that here in the classroom, which I'm completely fine with. I love on these kids as much as they need. But I've never taught in any other setting, so I don't know if that's a rural issue or if it's just a kid issue.

Participant A and participant B both shared for the most part professional development has met the needs of rural students and claimed, "kids are just kids" and their needs are not much different than other students' needs. Participant A felt she just "needs to be better at really implementing the things" she had learned for her students. Participant B believed that most professional development while not "specific to rural" students, it does address general things, "the things we need to know" such as trauma informed care but for the most part professional development is "generalized" and is something that "you would need for any kid anywhere." But at the same time, Participant B shared professional development "doesn't help you figure out how to do better in your room" rather she explained experience is the best teacher: "The more you do it [teach], the more you're comfortable with it, the more you know what to do." This goes back to her belief that most learning is done on one's own.

### **Teacher's Perception of Place and Their Professional Development Needs.**

Interestingly, most participants recognized the importance of rural context when making connections with rural students and making learning applicable; however, when participants



reflected on how the rural context influenced their own learning or professional development needs, most struggled to identify their place and its influence on their learning.

Participant B expressed having similar experiences and shared cultural background as her rural students made it easier for her to connect and relate to students. She recognized rural districts may contend with issues like poverty, or homelessness; however, these issues for her are “not so big” and therefore, “it doesn't drive” her teaching. When asked about how her beliefs on rural influenced her learning or teaching, it was hard for her to answer. She shared how it connected with her students: “This is the hard part, because to me [her], it's no different. They're just kids, the same kids I've always worked with. So, when you say, how is your teaching this, these are just the kids I've always taught.” Participant B added “I mean, my kids’ background or makeup for the most part, doesn't affect how I teach them because they're the same kind of people as me.” Participant B identified with her students on a social, cultural, and economic level and contended that she probably would “emphasize or spend more time” on content that was “more consistent with my [her] values/culture simply because it is more comfortable and familiar” to her.

When asked how her values and beliefs on rural influenced her learning or teaching, Participant C explained that growing up rural, she never thought it influenced her one way or another. To her it was just her reality. She explained,

I'm born and raised in Kansas. I always been from rural areas. So, to me, it just is. I don't think about it [rural] influencing me. Obviously, it does. And so, stopping and thinking about it, even compared to where I grew up to where I am now, and everything was interesting because like I said, I am never sat around and said, ‘Hmm, how does that influence me?’ So, it was interesting to think about.

Participant C later shared she works hard to “broaden my [her] perspectives” so that rural students who can be somewhat “insular” in their thinking are learning about the world outside of their small rural town. However, when it came to her own perception of learning, she revealed for the most part teachers are “a little insular here” and that “we don’t think about” how rural influences our learning and that maybe we should.

Participant D expressed several times throughout the interviewing process that “working with a rural district” it would be nice to understand how her own “bias” or assumptions play a part in what she is teaching to rural students. She believed that in teaching and learning, “it’s just not done alone” and that learning “is an organic progress that has fits and starts and should be done together.” When it came to explaining how these perceptions on rural applied to her own learning, she shared a time when she was learning how to incorporate STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Math) into her rural classroom and how the professional development experience allowed her to think about her own bias and its influence on her teaching. She explained,

I used to think of STEM as something that was like, you know, sort of Silicon Valley is something that was a little bit more remote. And I didn't see how it was applied in my own backyard and to my students' backyards. I thought when I went to Farm Day and when they gave us all these kits and then provided the professional development about how to show STEM in the world and within the community like blew my mind on the things that you can do with that, and it made me think very deeply about what I had been taught, what STEM was, and how I had my own bias about that.

In part Participant D recognized that her own bias or assumptions can influence how she teaches or what she has learned, thus having an impact on how students are learning, but

struggled to identify how place influenced her perceptions of what is effective professional learning.

Like most participants, when asked how rural context influences what they perceived to be effective professional development, Participant E did not consider her sense of place or place identity when it came to her perceptions of what is effective professional development but rather, she addressed effective professional development in terms of its applicability to her students and their needs and the affordability of the activity to implement for both her and her students.

However, Participant E discussed the importance of finding ways to connect with students and to meet them where they are. To do so, she described having to drop her “JoCo” self, a place she identifies with as suburban. She explained it this way,

I live in [suburban area]. and these kids live in a rural area. They talk about how they listen to country music and they're going home to their farm and all these things. I obviously do not live on a farm. We live in a very suburban area, so that lifestyle is kind of different like every time I come here. So, I really have to drop my ‘JoCo’ self because it doesn't vibe well here. So, I have to meet them where they are I instead of being me.

When asked to elaborate more on what it meant for her to drop her ‘JoCo’ self, she shared,

I always try to be very unbiased in everything that I teach, in that I do and in that we talk about in class. And so obviously the political and social views here are very different from even where I live and what I have. And so, I try not to let that be a barrier. I have to be very unbiased. So, I need to drop that part of myself whenever I come here, because I'm not trying to be a certain way. But then also, I need to meet them where they are. I don't know how to put it into words other than dropping my ‘JoCo’ self.

Participant E recognized place as some other place besides within the rural community she teaches in. For her to connect with students and parents, she must ‘drop’ that part of herself which doesn’t “vibe” well with the small rural conservative town.

### **Research Question 3**

In what ways do these perceptions inform teachers' decisions to act on their new learning? After reflecting on the emerging themes and codes from the first two interviews, there was a need to explore participants' values and beliefs about rural students and whether those helped inform their decisions on the *what* and the *how* of teaching rural students and to consider if it played a part in what participants found as most effective professional development. As a result, participants were asked to respond in written form to three questions and then a follow-up interview was conducted. Research question three correlates to the fifth finding:

- Most participants acknowledged effective professional development needed to be applicable, engaging, and reflective without consideration of the rural context.

#### **Connecting Professional Development to Rural Teacher Needs.**

This finding relates to the theme entitled *connecting professional development to rural teacher needs*. Three categories emerged within this theme: (a) application to classroom; (b) engaging; (c) reflective.

**Application to Classroom.** Professional learning needs to be applicable and should fit the “puzzle of my room,” as Participant D shared. When teachers make connections to the learning and see real application in their classroom, the professional learning experience is more effective. Participant D preferred that professional development presenters would “first present research and then content” but majority of the time should be spent where “someone [would]

come around and help me tailor it to my own classroom.” For her, she wanted it was important to “take what has been taught and apply it to my own unique experience.”

Participant B shared having very similar experiences and shared values much of what she learns can be implemented in the classroom. She explained that professional learning should be applicable and can be “implemented into the classroom” when it is “meaningful and purposeful” and answers the question: “How can it be helpful in the classroom?”

Participant C shared while content is important in professional development where she is in her professional learning experience, she wants professional development to be applicable to her students. Knowing how to “connect with kids is more important” to her especially since she has seen a greater need to connect with students on a social and emotional level over the years.

Participant E expressed that professional development should be “directly applicable so that teachers can immediately put the strategy or content into practice in their classroom.” She continued to share that “making it [professional development] directly applicable” instead more for the masses. She described a time when all teachers were asked to attend professional development on a district wide training for assessment screeners. While the training “was applicable,” she stated, “it’s still not like you’re going to have some aha moment while learning how to do a running record.”

While most participants discussed professional development as being something they could apply right away to their classroom and could make it “fit the puzzle” of their room, Participant A connected professional development to rural needs of her students. She explained that professional development needed to be applicable to her rural students and it was most effective when it “fit” her students’ needs. She continued that professional development must be “relevant to the country kid that’s going to go take this weekend off to go deer hunting.”

Participant A recognized rural context should be considered to make learning applicable, while all other participants did not consider the rural context.

**Engaging.** Professional development that provides active learning engages teachers directly “in the practices they are learning” and helps connect what they are learning to the classroom (Darling-Hammond, L. et al., 2017). Three of the five participants discussed the importance of engagement as it relates to their learning.

Participant A expressed that professional learning needs to be engaging. She exclaimed, “It’s got to be engaging. I learn best when it is.” When reflecting on engagement, it reminded her on how she engages students when they are struggling to maintain focus. She tells them “If you’re not engaged,” she’ll stop teaching and “get down on one knee and say, ‘Will you marry me?’ Now, that is engaging” as she and her students would laugh.

Participant E expressed that good professional development “comes down to how engaging the content is and how engaging the presenter is.” She explained that if the presenter is “droning on about data or droning on about all of the responsibilities that I’m supposed to have as a teacher, then I just completely zoned out because I can only take in so much information at once.” For her, there is no time to process the information. Engaging professional development is “where [she] gets excited” about the learning and it has “that hands on feel” to make her “excited to come back to school and be like, ‘Okay, when can I fit this in? This is going to be awesome and beneficial for the kids.’”

Participant A and Participant C both referenced a time when professional development was a shared experience among three different rural districts. Each year teachers would attend professional learning at a different district. They would participant or lead some of the learning experiences. They had many opportunities to share in the learning with other educators who are

much like themselves. Participant C recalled how this event would take place right after Christmas break and how nice it was because “teachers weren’t just sitting and getting” information. She stated, “it was nice to talk to others” and to have the “opportunity to collaborate with people in different districts.” While each district “brought their own personality and its own way of doing things,” there was a shared understanding of similar “struggles and challenges” they faced together. Participant A remembered how “very cool” it was to attend and the “variety of activities’ that were available in more of an “Edcamp style.” They both could not recall how or why the event ended. Participant C surmised when it was time for her district to host the event, it never came to fruition, and cited spacing and funding issues as possible reasons.

**Reflective.** Professional learning that “provides built-in time for teachers to reflect and receive input from others” help teachers move toward a share understanding of thoughtful and purposeful practice (Darling-Hammond, L. et al., 2017) Four of the five participants expressed the need for professional learning to be reflective but only two shared how this process made them consider the rural context.

When reflecting on her own values and beliefs about teaching rural students, Participant A shared, “You know, I don't want to think that I'm getting stale, and I try not to do anything the same way twice. I believe professional development needs to be reflective. Yeah. and it's not a baloney session on reflection. I mean, to me, I take it seriously.” She continued to say even doing this study has allowed her to reflect on her own teaching and that of teaching rural students: “I never really thought of these kids as rural kids but now, I am.”

Participant C mirrored a similar response. She explained,

Honestly, until I started doing this with you [researcher], I never really thought about it [teaching rural students] that much. But now doing this with you and like I said, my niece

teaching in a much bigger district and hearing kind of what she's going through has kind opened my eyes. We really don't pay enough attention to the whole rural versus city thing. The dynamic and how different it is; it is worth looking at it, for sure.

Participant D explained that professional development presenters “do a lot more activities” and provide some level of “engagement,” but it is more about how you plan for it “in a deeper, more meaningful manner. And that's hard, especially when you're rushed, you're just trying to survive the week.”

Participant E shared the importance of reflective learning, something she was taught in her undergraduate studies and has applied it to her professional development experiences:

When it regards professional learning, you have to be able to have that time to reflect and think, ‘Okay, how can I actually use this in my classroom? How can I take this piece of information and make it useful for the students? I think just all of it in general, it needs to be reflective. And then especially as things keep changing in education and in society in general, teachers need to go back and think ‘Okay, am I actually approaching this the correct way? Or should I be like changing my thinking in that way?’

She continued saying making time during professional development for “PLCs or teams to strategize how to implement the strategy learned” would be most helpful. This would then lead into opportunities for teams to be more reflective in their practice. Participant E concluded with “Proper reflection takes time and would most benefit our students.”

## **Summary**

Chapter 4 encompassed descriptions of the finding from this research study. It included the research questions, summary of findings and the data and results. Data collection consisted of individual semi-structured interviews from five participants, who ranged from three to 21 years’



experience teaching in a rural setting and having varied educational upbringings. Five major themes resulted from this data collection: (a) professional development challenges; (b) complex community relationships; (c) teacher connectivity to rural students; (d) teacher perceptions; and (e) connecting to professional development. These themes uncovered several categories and helped to identify four overarching findings. The findings revealed participants acknowledge the challenges districts face when providing effective professional development and that professional development is most beneficial when it connects to their specific needs. Most participants acknowledged the complexity of rural relationships and the care that is taken to connect with rural students and their parents. In addition, participants recognized how their personal histories and experiences helped them to make and enrich those connections.

## **Chapter Five – Discussion and Conclusion**

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this study was to explore how rural educators' sense of place and educational upbringing influenced what they perceived as effective professional development. The study used three semi-structured interviews; one interview included a written response to three questions. This study occurred over a 13-week period. The study specifically looked at shared stories of rural teachers and to explore how their sense of place and educational upbringing influenced what they see as effective learning opportunities. Using a narrative analysis approach to five rural educators' stories and drawing on Gruenewald's Critical Pedagogy of Place as my lens, this study sought to answer the following research question:

**How do teachers' sense of place and educational upbringing influence their perceptions of effective professional development?**

It was important in this study to allow participants to tell their stories and to share their perspective as it relates to their professional learning. It is through our stories, the researcher explored how the subtle nuances of rural life help teachers conceptualize their own sense of place and how it informs their perceptions of their own learning. This chapter is broken down into five sections: (a) discussion of major findings by question; (b) implications; (c) limitations; (d) recommendation for future research; and (e) the conclusion.

### **Discussion of Research Questions and Its Findings**

Using Gruenewald's Critical Pedagogy of Place helps to serve as the framework for understanding how teachers conceptualized and identify with their sense of place and, if any, do these perceptions influence what they perceive to be effective professional development.

Gruenewald's Critical theory of place "aims to evaluate the appropriateness of our relationships to each other, and to our social-ecological places" and encourages teachers to reimagine their place --socially, ecologically, and politically (Gruenewald, 2003a). This study revealed most participants recognized the rural context as a contributing factor in their teaching and connections with students but failed to associate their sense of place and place identity as a contributing factor to their perception of effective learning. Gruenewald contends that Critical Pedagogy of Place allows us to examine "the place-specific nexus between environment, culture and education" and in doing so one can consider these special nuances and how rural context influences educators in their learning environments (Gruenewald, 2003a). As Azano & Stewart (2015) and White & Reid (2008) suggests, it provides a place for teachers who are preparing to teach rural students a way to reach the "specific needs of rural learners."

Utilizing Gruenewald's Critical Theory of place, I was able to examine and come to understand how or if at all teachers' educational upbringing and sense of place influenced their perceptions on what is effective professional development. Three sub questions guided the study:

1. How do teachers in a rural setting perceive building and district level professional development?
2. In what ways does sense of place inform teachers' perceptions of effective professional development?
3. In what ways do these perceptions inform teachers' decisions to act on their new learning?

The study revealed five key themes participants recognized as challenges districts face when providing effective professional development. Most participants acknowledged the complexity of rural relationships and the care that is taken to connect with rural students and

their community in order for teachers to make meaning of their learning and apply it in the classroom. The study further revealed while most participants recognized how their personal histories and experiences helped them to make and enrich these connections, little consideration was given to their own sense of place when it came to teacher learning. In other words, teachers did not fully see how their own positionality may influence what they find is effective professional learning, only furthering the complexity of place and how we come to know and understand our self within that place. This section will discuss each sub question, its findings, its relationship to literature and the implications as a result of the study.

### **Teachers' Perceptions on Professional Development**

The findings in research on the challenges of offering professional development to rural teachers is shared concern among each participant. All participants viewed professional development necessary to grow as educators and that all professional development whether district or building led does have inherent issues. The literature review revealed teacher dissatisfaction with professional development exists despite concerted efforts made by rural districts to ensure highly effective professional development opportunities are available (Learning Forward, 2017; Hirsh, 2015). Many of the concerns shared among the participants, included district limitations with resources and funds, geographical isolation and the impact Covid-19 pandemic had on teachers' ability to learn and attend professional development (Azano & Stewart, 2015; Peltola et al., 2017; Peterson, 2021; Reagan et al., 2019; and Wilson & Ringstaff, 2010).

Research supported most rural districts are at a disadvantage when it comes to providing effective professional development, citing limited resources and lack of funding as a major concern (Hunt-Barron et al., 2015; Howley & Howley, 2005; Lynch, 2000; Marlow & Cooper,

2008). While this weighed heavily on the participants' minds, it was something they came to accept. For example, Participant B and Participant C each expressed how money was a "big concern" when it came to professional development yet conceded that rural districts work on limited means and that is just how it was. This was most evident when Participant B shared it "was normal" to "have less money in smaller schools," and when Participant C shared, teachers were "never really encouraged" to seek professional learning opportunities because of money issues, she exclaimed,

They want[ed] us [teachers] to spend money on it. So, I would say if you asked any of us old timers here, they're going to tell you we just haven't done a lot of work [professional development].

This willingness to accept current rural conditions and acknowledge this is the way it is for rural educators perpetuate the notion that rural teachers are always at a disadvantage when it comes to their professional learning and left to "do more of what we [teachers] do on our [their] own" (Participant B). In addition, most participants explained having limited funds inhibited them from receiving support from specialists or mentors because they were not readily available. Participant A expressed her difficulty in finding those "you could reach out to," and as Participant E shared her mentoring experience had been anything but "rigorous" and "specific" to her professional needs, despite research supporting mentoring as an effective form of professional development (de la Garza, 2016; Lindenberg et al., 2016).

The study revealed geographical isolation as another contributing factor in receiving inadequate and ineffective professional development. Research supports geographic distance from professional development workshops and professional networks further isolates rural teachers, causing them to find their own professional learning and to work in complete isolation

of others (Howley & Howley, 2005; Peterson, 2012; Wilson & Ringstaff, 2010). As Participant C expressed with limiting funds and the perception districts do not encourage spending money on professional development, teachers were left to their own “in house” sort of professional learning while others expressed feeling “isolated” because of the inability to access resources or support. Although participants referenced technology as a way to help bridge the gap between limited funds and providing effective professional development, technology access was inconsistent and something one “sort of” used but did not rely on it (Participant E).

Last, the study revealed, while the implications of Covid 19 was not a consideration for the study, Covid-19 impacted teacher learning and professional development opportunities. Participants reported difficulty engaging in new learning and most were “just struggling to survive” this school year. Over the past few years, teachers’ professional development had been through online learning or at times cancelled due to rising Covid cases. Because of the mitigation measurements such as mask wearing or social distancing, teachers reported they were unable to make personal connections and build relationships with their students, a value rural teachers find important when teaching rural students. Online learning made it difficult to connect with their students, each other and with their learning.

Attending to the concerns and challenges teachers in rural districts face runs the risk of subscribing to a deficit thinking model about rural schools; however, it is the researcher’s intention that the challenges these teachers face when it comes to their professional learning is used to “examine the contextual realities” of rural place and to examine how these contexts can influence teachers’ perception on their professional learning (Azano & Stewart, 2015). For example, most participants believed that since small rural schools lack funds and resources for their professional development needs, they are left to their own devices when it comes to their

professional learning. When teachers are left to find an “in house” approach to professional learning or are limited in attending professional development, their perception of these professional development experiences become negative and therefore do not seem to be effective.

Another consideration to this study is that most participants did not view the rural context as a significant part to their professional development needs, instead citing lack of money, limited resources, and geographical isolation as major concerns. This supports current research findings and heightens even more the need for research on the rural context and how it is integral part to providing professional development to rural teachers (Howley & Howley, 2005; Reagan et al., 2019). Gruenewald (2003a) suggests if humans are “place makers” and are “responsible for place making,” we then must become “conscious of ourselves as place makers and participants in the sociopolitical process of place making” (p. 627). This means we must begin by considering the rural place not just as a locality but how we see ourselves and how we make meaning within place. In doing so, teachers can begin to think critically about place and how our sense of place may influence not only what we teach but what we perceive to be as effective learning.

### **Sense of Place and Teachers’ Perceptions of Effective PD**

Exploring how teachers’ sense of place and educational upbringing influences their perception of effective professional development, this study revealed three distinct themes in the research: a) influences of personal histories on teaching and learning (b) complex community relationships, and (c) teachers’ perceptions on rural professional development. From these three themes emerged the following findings:

- Most participants acknowledged education upbringing and experiences in rural setting influenced their sense of readiness teaching rural students.
- Most participants acknowledged complex community relationships existed in rural school districts, making teaching, and learning unique to the rural environment.
- Most participants acknowledged effective professional development needed to align to rural student needs but failed to associate the rural context to their own learning.

The study revealed participants, regardless of their educational upbringings and personal histories in a rural setting, applied their lived experiences to their learning and teaching. For example, three of the five participants acknowledged how their specific rural upbringing helped them to connect and acknowledge the subtleties of teaching in a rural school district. Participant C shared how growing up in a rural area, one much smaller than where her students live, helped her “to associated better with the kids.” It gave her “a unique perspective” and allowed her to “understand the dynamics” that “are at play” in a rural setting. Participant B indicated her experiences living in the same rural community made her feel “connected” and “relatable” to her students and that these connections made it easier for her to teach students. These participants used their sense of place to make connections with their students, allowing them to come to know and understand themselves and their students within a rural place. Even though research suggests that ways of knowing a place are not fixed and growing up rural can prevent one from coming to know a place and thereby keep one from coming to know oneself in that place, participants felt living in and among similar rural communities as their students enabled them to come to know and understand their place identity and find those connections with their students (Somerville et al., 2010; Reagan et al., 2019).



The study also revealed participants whose personal histories and educational upbringing varied from their students were able to capitalize on these varying experiences to enrich student-teacher connections and their students' learning. Participant A shared she had the "best of both worlds" growing up as a Navy kid, having travelled and lived in big cities, and then being able to go back to her mother's farm and raise her family. She used these experiences to expand her students' understanding of the world around them and tried to get them to think outside "of their bubble." Other participants connect with students and their learning by "teaching content that both pertains" to their own students' experiences and "broadens their world view." For example, Participant C shared even though "grew up in a rural area," she felt strongly about "experience[ing] the rest of the world" and carried these experiences into her teaching. It is important for her to "show my [her] students a variety of topics in order for them to see other perspectives and not just the insular atmosphere they are used to." Most participants see rural place as a way to inform their teaching. Drawing from their personal experiences, whether rural or not, participants saw the value in making content specific and meaningful to the rural student. As White & Reid (2008) suggests, teachers come to know about a "particular rural place and its relationships to and with other places" begin to develop an awareness and understanding of the rural setting. Clearly, participants valued their experiences, understanding of the world and their place in it to enrich their understanding and connection with rural students.

The study also found the school and community relationships play a significant part of the rural teaching experience. Participant D explained it best when she described how a school is like a train hub for our community: "A small school is like integral to that community. It's kind of like the train station and, you know, everyone came and got something from the school or needed something or donated something.... it feels more like the school is a central hub of a

town.” As such the school is very much a part of the community and what the community brings to the school, making it the connections between the two complex (Gallo, 2019). Most participants valued the closeness and connection they have with the community, their parents, and students. As participant C and Participant B shared, small rural communities have parents who are highly invested and involved in their schools and this “close knit and supportive” atmosphere allows them to connect with their “students on a deeper level.” Participant E echoed the same sentiment that rural schools possess a community feel which makes the interactions more “personable” and helps her to establish better relationships with her students and parents, even though she was very aware of being an “outsider” within the community. She explained it this way when she said,

I am an outsider because I don’t know all the different family things of who can sit with you, who can talk with you and so there’s a disconnect, like I am a part of the community because I am here everyday teaching but I not that much a part of the community where I’m here on the weekends.

Participant E identifies with her students and parents within the school community but is keenly aware she is not part of the local community. Here her place and place identity are situated within the school community and feels a sense of belonging but does not identify with her place in the community at large. Later, it is discussed how participant E defines her place and place identity.

The study also revealed this sense of community connectedness allowed participants space to build relationships with their students and within the classroom. This in turn helped inform their teaching. Participants shared knowing about their students’ backgrounds enabled them to connect learning to students’ experiences therefore making learning more meaningful.

Others shared how connecting on a more personable level with their parents helped them to create relationships with students and as a result, students were “more willing to work” for you and more willing to see outside of their insular thinking (Participant C). Participant D capitalized on what rural students bring to the class, a strong sense of community, and used this strength as way to introduce new teaching strategies and activities. For example, Participant D used strategies like cooperative learning or project-based learning in her lessons, all of which draw upon a shared experience of learning.

The research from this study illustrated rural community relationships continues to form and inform teachers’ perceptions of themselves in and around place. These relationships while at times difficult to navigate provides insight in how teachers perceive their sense of place and place within community and school. As Schulte (2018) explained, it is through a “heightened self-awareness of their place, teachers are more likely to use this information to connect with their students and develop strengths-based views of rural communities.” As participants come to know their place, it is important to capitalize on this place identity as it relates not only to community and classroom relationships but also to how sense of place may inform our learning.

When asked about teacher perception on rural professional development, research revealed that most participants acknowledged professional development did not align to rural student needs and some struggled to identify what were rural students’ needs. Moreover, participants were unable to connect their place identity to their own personal learning experiences, meaning teachers did not see rural as part of their own positionality and therefore could not connect how rural influenced their perceptions of what is effective professional learning. When it came to teachers’ perception on rural professional development, most participants found professional development was “generic,” “overly broad,” and not “specific” to

the rural setting. In fact, Participant E noted that all professional development is taken with a “grain of salt,” you never know what you going to get nor how it can apply to your specific needs. When asked specifically about meeting rural student needs, four of the five participants shared they had a difficult time in deciding what was a rural student need verses just a student need and explained “kids are just kids” and their needs are not any different than other students. Participants did not consider the rural context as an important factor to their professional development experience, but this may be because most participants could not see how the rural contributes to their place identity and therefore did not see how it influenced their learning. For example, Participant B identified with her students on a socially, culturally, and economically level and as such it did not influence her teaching or learning. She exclaimed, “my kids’ background or makeup” does not affect how she teaches them because they are the “same people as me.” She believed that because of their shared rural experiences, she identified with her students, even though research argues having knowledge of a rural place can prevent one from coming to know that place (Somerville et al., 2010, p. 39). Participant C and A, whose background and educational upbringings are most like their rural students, acknowledged they never considered how rural context influenced their learning. As Participant C shared, “I have always been from a rural area” and so stopping to think how rural influences my learning is not something she thinks about: “To me it [rural] just is. I don’t think about it influencing me.” But later she acknowledged that maybe the rural context should be something that “is worth looking at.”

Participant D and Participant E, whose background and educational upbringings are least like their rural students, addressed how their bias and assumptions about rural can influence what they teach in the classroom but like the other participants, did not recognize rural as part of their

positionality and therefore made it difficult to connect how rural influenced their learning.

Participant D discussed the time when she had misconceptions about STEM and what it meant to engage students in STEM learning. After attending professional development on how STEM fits within the rural context, it opened her eyes and allowed her to see how her own bias/assumptions about STEM influenced what and how she would teach in the classroom. Participant D recognized how her own biases she brings to her learning was something she needed to be able to “turn that on and off” in order to meet her rural students’ needs. This was also evident with Participant E when she shared connecting with her students meant having to drop her “JoCo” self. She explained how careful she must be not to impose her own “biases” and “political and social views” upon on her students because they differ completely from her students. She called this “dropping her JoCo” self in order to connect with students.

Most participants valued the importance of the rural context as it applied to their understanding and teaching of rural students. Participants identify rural as place; however, they did not see it as part of their positionality. If research tells us that one’s “sense of place is linked with one’s construction of self in that place through conscious and intentional interaction,” then as rural educators, we need to be more aware of how rural plays a part not only in our teaching and the context but in how we view and see rural in our learning (Reagan et al., 2019). It is through Gruenewald’s critical theory of place which provides a lens for educators to challenge their “cultural, political, economic and ecological” understanding of place and to constantly asks “what needs to be transformed and what needs to be conserved” whenever we talk about teacher learning (Gruenewald, 2003a, p.16).

## **Teacher Perceptions Inform Decisions to Act on Their Learning**

Rural teachers believed for professional development to be effective it must connect to the needs of rural students. In doing so professional development must be applicable to their students' needs, it must be engaging or include active learning, and last, professional development must allow teachers to reflect on their learning. The study revealed rural teachers identified some of the key features of effective professional development that have been found in research. These include but not limited to the following: (1) professional development must be specific to the needs of the students and easily to implement in order for teachers to put into practice; (2) it must be engaging, allowing teachers to have that 'hands on' feeling to work with, grapple with and even question the content they are learning; and (3) professional development must provide time for feedback and reflection (Bates & Morgan, 2018; Darling-Hammond et al., 2017).

Many participants discussed the importance of making professional development applicable. And as Participant D shared, "it needed to fit the puzzle of my [her] room." To do so, Participant D explained the professional development content needed to be "tailored" to her students and easily applied "to my[her] own unique experiences" – those experiences include the rural students' experiences. Others mentioned that professional development needed to be "directly applicable so teachers can readily implement," while one participant believed in order for professional development to be applicable, it needed to be "relevant to the country kid" who takes the weekends off to go hunting. These findings are supported in Darling-Hammond et al. (2017) review of 35 studies on professional development which found professional development that is "context specific" and "content based" is particularly important for "addressing the diverse needs of students (and thus teachers) in differing settings" and supported by Mohan et

al., (2017b) findings that teachers perceived professional development that is “based on students and school specific needs” was more effective in changing teacher practice than any planned professional development.

The study also revealed that professional development needed to be engaging. Most participants shared they learn best when they are actively engaged with the content and made comments like “I learn best when it [content] is engaging” or engaging professional development is “where I get excited” and “has the hands-on feel.” Research reveals that effective professional development provides teachers with “opportunities to get hands-on experience designing and practicing new teaching strategies” can effectively support student learning and growth (Darling-Hammond, 2017). If teachers are actively engaged in their learning, they are more inclined to implement their new learning.

Last, the study revealed participants valued professional development that was reflective. Research supports professional development experiences that build in time for teachers to think about, discuss and make changes to their practice has shown positives gains in student learning. Allowing teachers time to reflect helps them “to move thoughtfully toward the expert visions of practice that they may have learned about or seen modeled during professional development” (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). Most participants valued professional development that provides reflection because it allows teachers to “plan in a deeper, more meaningful way” and allows them to continually ask “How can I use this?” “Am I approaching this the right way?” “Or should I be changing my thinking in that way?” Participant E connected the importance of reflection when she stated: “Proper reflection takes time” and when done correctly “benefits the students the most.” Participant E perceived being a reflective practitioner is key to improving teacher performance and thereby improves student success. If teachers perceive reflection as a

key component to their professional development experience or believe it improves their professional learning, then the need for districts to rely on outside resources or being isolated geographically when it comes to offering professional learning in a way can be mitigated. Utilizing reflection as a professional learning tool allows teachers the opportunity to learn from each other and within their own social place. This reinforces the importance of place and adds another layer of complexity to how place and place identity can inform teacher perceptions of their own learning.

While most participants valued professional development that is applicable, engaging, and reflective, key characteristics of effective professional development, again almost none of them acknowledged the rural context as an important consideration to what they perceived is effective professional development. In fact, two participants, whose backgrounds are most like their students, until doing this study, mentioned they never considered how rural played a part in their learning. When reflecting on their professional development experiences, they both shared the rural context and rural place should be something we consider as we think about our professional development needs and what we teachers bring to our students. Just like participant C stated earlier, “it is worth looking at, for sure.” Research supports her sentiment as many of the studies on rural professional development documents the challenges related to professional development and does not consider the rural context (Barrett et al., 2015; Howley & Howley, 2005; Glover et al., 2016). If coming to know place, such that the interactions among personal and professional identities are shaped by one’s personal histories and by a shared rural social space, teachers then may begin to construct a rural identity that is “linked to a rural place” (Azano & Stewart, 2015, as cited in Reagan et al., 2019). As a result, these rural identities and teachers’ own histories could possibly help to inform their sense of place as well as how they



perceive their own learning within a rural place. Understanding how teachers position themselves within place and apply place in their learning could better inform what makes professional development effective for rural educators and therefore help improve the overall professional development experience.

### **Implications for Practice**

This study raises a few considerations for rural district and professional development leaders and their efforts in developing and offering effective professional development opportunities. If districts want to improve classroom instruction and build teacher capacity for learning, they need to be strategic, work the budget and build in personalized and shared learning experiences that addresses needs of rural students and considers what teachers bring to the rural context in which the professional learning is shared.

The findings within the study have the capacity to guide and support district leaders in their efforts to providing professional development that is engaging, on-going, applicable, and reflective. Knowing that teachers perceived current professional development experiences as ineffective and limiting due to lack of resources and funding, district leaders can make concerted efforts to change teacher perception by being strategic in how they allocate professional development funds, work to build teacher learning networks and support systems and create on-going learning opportunities throughout the school year. By making these concerted efforts, districts can begin to alter teacher perception of their learning experiences and therefore hope to see teachers are engaging in and implementing their new learning.

By drawing from Gruenewald's critical pedagogy of place as a framework for this study, it allowed the researcher to understand how teachers conceptualize their own sense of place and place identities that may or may not inform their perception of what is effective professional

development (Gruenewald, 2003a, p. 10). Through this lens, findings suggested teachers recognized rural as a place but not as part of their place identity and therefore were unable to articulate how rural plays a part in their own learning. If places “teach us who, what and where we are, as well as how we might live our lives” (Gruenewald, 2003b, p. 636), then as researchers, we must begin to look at how teachers make meaning of place and how it informs their teaching and learning. By understanding how rural educators identify with their sense of place and how their place identity influences their professional learning experiences, district and professional development leaders can create professional development experiences or provide learning opportunities specific to the rural context and to the needs of teachers and students.

### **Limitations**

The limitations in this study inform future research. Overall, the study was successful and there were some subtle nuances learned throughout. One major consideration is the transferability of the study. The researcher used purposeful sampling to ensure thick, in-depth descriptions of the data so that a reader who wishes to “transfer” the results to a different context is able to make judgment of how sound that transfer is (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 256). Because the sample size is from one rural district and small in number, it is important to note not all results can or should be transferred. What happens in one particular location does not mean the results will be easily transferred to another location. Readers must take care in how they choose to use the results and keep in mind the different contexts in which the results are being applied. In addition, to the sample size, other limitations included time constraints, sample selection, and researcher connection to the participating district.

The biggest limitation to the study was the time constraints placed on the researcher and on the participants. Initially, recruiting districts and teachers to participant in this study proved

costly to the timeline. The study was to last 16 weeks that included time for participants to attend not only professional development provided by the district but also to have opportunities to attend professional learning on their own. This process would have allowed teachers to experience, act, and reflect on new learning, allowing the researcher to dive deeper into how place influences teachers' perceptions on their professional learning. Because of the time constraint and the limiting opportunities for professional development, teachers were left on their own to experience professional development and with the timeline shortened by three weeks, many did not have the opportunity to attend any outside learning.

The second limitation includes sample selection. Using a non-probability selection sample allowed me to purposefully select samples from which “most could be learned,” reaching the depth and breadth needed (Creswell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). However, selecting participants ranging from three to twenty plus years of teaching experience proved to be difficult in finding commonalities and connections among and between the participants and their professional development experiences. This may be a consideration for future research.

Another limitation or consideration is the connection and position the researcher held in relationship to the participants. Because the researcher was part of the same district as all participants and shared the responsibility with other district administrators in creating and developing professional development for teachers, at times participants seemed guarded or were careful in sharing their experiences on district led professional development, thus making it difficult to know if their responses were authentic and true. This became apparent when, occasionally, participants' behaviors changed, or the body shifted slightly, or you could hear a slight hesitancy in their voice.

## **Recommendation for Further Research**

The recommendation includes ways to expand or strengthen the study for further research. They include insights into the researcher's experience from this study and its findings. The recommendations include changes to the research methods, such consideration would include sample selection, extended timeline, and required participation in both district led and self-selected professional development opportunities. Another consideration worth noting is the impact Covid-19, a global pandemic, has had on teacher's mental health and well-being and their ability to attend professional development.

This study called for a non-probability sampling which allowed the researcher to purposefully select participants who would garner the most that "could be learned" and thereby reach the depth and breadth needed (Creswell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). But because of time constraints, the original pool size was small, resulting in selected participants to vary significant in years of teaching experience and professional development experiences. In addition, all participants came from the same rural district. This made it difficult to find connections among the participants' experiences and all were limited in receiving professional development offered by that one district. A recommendation for future research would be to expand into other districts that offer a variety of professional development experiences and then to focus selection of participants based on years experienced, by grade bands and even by content.

Another consideration for future research is to extend the length of the study to a full semester or even a complete year. Initial recruiting efforts took longer than the researcher anticipated, pushing the timeline back by three weeks in the semester. Considering the limited opportunities within a district's calendar year for professional development to begin with, the

participants missed opportunities to draw upon any additional professional so much of the data collected was generated from past experiences requiring participants to generalize about their learning. These missed opportunities could add valuable data and insight into the participant's perceptions on their learning and their place in that learning. Also, by extending the timeline throughout the year, participants will be able to take full advantage of district led and personalize professional learning opportunities and, in this instance, have time to apply and reflect on their learning.

As participants reflected and shared their professional development stories and experiences, many recalled the effects Covid-19, a global pandemic has had and continues to have not only on their mental health and well-being but also in how they receive and experience professional learning. Many recalled how professional development opportunities were either cancelled or if, at all, offered, were attended online and in isolation of each other. Even in its second year dealing with Covid-19 restrictions, masks mandates and fluctuating teaching environments, teachers have reported this year to be most difficult on their mental health. Therefore, careful consideration should be given to the participants, their experiences and to the findings of this study.

### **Closing Remarks**

When determining a research topic for my dissertation, I struggled to find what would resonate with me and allow me to become a better educator than before. After many failed attempts to find my direction, I decided to return to my "why," meaning what was it that stood at the heart of my learning and what was motivating me to complete this dissertation. As mentioned in my positionality, I was raised in a rural, predominantly farming community, where my educational experiences were adequate at best. Having these lived experiences and understanding

the challenges, assumptions and biases surrounding rural education and rural educators helped me to connect, understand and interact with the participants and at times even question my own biases and assumptions of rural education.

As an educational leader in a rural district and charged with leading professional development, this study and the findings weigh heavily on how I will go about developing and implementing professional development for our district. Keeping in mind, this study was not meant to characterize rural teachers in general or to even suggest that these five teachers represent all rural teachers. To do so would only simplify those experiences and the narratives of rurality. Instead, the narratives represent the complexity of the participants' lives and demonstrates how complex understanding one's sense of place, its influences on self within place and how this influences what we see as relevant and effective learning.

The study allowed me to better understand how rural teachers perceived their own professional development experiences, and through their personal histories and experiences were able to come to identify and know themselves within place and how place influenced their approach in teaching. What was inconclusive in the research is how participants see their sense of place in relationship to their learning. If rural is not recognized as part of teacher place identity, through this lens, teachers would never see rural as an important part of what they find as effective learning experiences. It is clear rural educational leaders need to continue to build teachers' capacity and awareness of the contexts in which they teach, continue to challenge their judgments, biases, and assumptions, and to seek out ways to leverage what teachers bring to their professional learning. By attending to more research on how place and place identity shapes and informs our perceptions on our learning, it would go a long way in helping districts meet the specific needs of rural educators and their students.

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## Appendix A - Object-elicit Interview Protocol

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Time of Interview: \_\_\_\_\_

Location: \_\_\_\_\_ Code Number: \_\_\_\_\_

Guidelines: Before the interview begins, the research reminds the interviewee of the purpose of the study and process for data collection. A verbal review of the informed consent and confidentiality agreement will occur, and the participant will be asked if he or she has any questions prior to the interview. If there are none, the interview will begin with acknowledgement of the recording to start and then will signify when it ends.

Take a moment and reflect on the lesson plan, activity, or assignment you brought for this initial interview. Try to recall how you learned about this activity, what inspired you to incorporate it into your classroom, and the successes or struggles you have had with this activity. What made this professional learning affective that it inspired you to embed it into your teaching?

**RQ1:** How do teachers in a rural setting perceive building and district level professional development?

1. As you reflect on the activity, lesson plan, or assignment, what inspired you to implement this activity into your classroom?
2. Describe the professional learning you received on this activity. Did it influence your decision to implement in the classroom?
3. When reflecting on your district or building level professional development experiences, what has made those experiences successful? Or what were the best things about those professional development sessions?
4. How do those professional development sessions compare to outside professional learning opportunities?



5. Reflecting on your professional development experiences so far, how has the staff professional development affected your teaching?
6. Think about some of your least favorable professional development experiences, why were these sessions some of your least favorable?
7. In your opinion, what are the strengths of your district and building professional development program? How could it be improved?

## Appendix B - Semi – Structured Interview Protocol

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Time of Interview: \_\_\_\_\_

Location: \_\_\_\_\_ Code Number: \_\_\_\_\_

Guidelines: Before the interview begins, the research reminds the interviewee of the purpose of the study and process for data collection. A verbal review of the informed consent and confidentiality agreement will occur, and the participant will be asked if he or she has any questions prior to the interview. If there are none, the interview will begin with acknowledgement of the recording to start and then when it will end.

**RQ2:** In what ways does sense of place inform teachers' perceptions of effective professional development?

1. Tell me a little about your experiences growing up in a rural school district?
2. Is your current school district similar to or different from the school you attended as a high school student?
3. How would you describe or characterize your students?
4. How would you describe your preparation for teaching in a rural setting?
5. Explain if and how the rural context influences what you teach in your classroom?
6. Explain if and how the rural context influences what you perceive is effective professional development.
7. What do you perceive as challenges to teaching in a rural school?
8. What do you perceive as benefits to teaching in a rural school?
9. In what ways have your professional development experiences met the needs of rural educators and rural students? Explain
10. In what ways have your professional development experiences not met the needs of rural educators?

**RQ3:** In what ways do these perceptions inform teachers' decisions to act on their new learning?

1. As you reflect on your own beliefs and values about **rural students**, how do your own beliefs and values help inform your decisions on what you teach to your students?  
  
Provide details/examples
2. As you reflect on your own beliefs and values about **rural students**, how do your own beliefs and values help inform your decisions on how you teach to your students? Provide details/examples.
3. According to research, effective professional development should include the following:  
it should be job-embedded, engaging, content focused, timely, collaborative, reflective, and sustaining over time. Considering these core features, what sort of PD do you believe is the most effective for teachers to reach the needs of **all** rural students?

## Appendix C - Demographic Questionnaire

1. Where did you graduate from high school?
2. Did you grow up in a rural, suburban or urban area?
3. Do you currently live in a rural area? Do you have children who attend a rural school?
4. What is the highest level of degree received in your profession? Please circle one.

Bachelor

Masters

Post-graduate

5. What is your level of teaching experience? Please circle one.

1-3 Years

3-5 Years

5-7 Years

8-10 Years

6. What is the number of hours that you have participated in professional development activities during the previous school year?

\_\_\_\_\_ Number of hours during the school day

\_\_\_\_\_ Number of hours outside of the school day

7. What is the number of hours you plan to participate in professional development activities this coming year?

\_\_\_\_\_ Number of hours during the school day

\_\_\_\_\_ Number of hours outside of the school day

## Appendix D – Superintendent Recruiting Email

Dear

My name is Gwendolyn Jacobs. I am the Director of Teaching & Learning at \_\_\_\_\_ and am a doctoral candidate in the Curriculum and Instruction Program through K-State. I am reaching out to a few area superintendents in hopes to gain permission to seek participants/volunteers (teachers) for my research study at your district. Below provides a snapshot of the study. I have attached a letter that provides more information and a place to sign if you approve. In addition, I have attached a sample building level administrator letter that I will send out, if this is approved.

My Topic: *The Power of Place: Teachers' Perceptions on Effective Professional Development.*

The Goal: To seek an understanding of how teachers' sense of place and their educational upbringing inform their perceptions on what is effective professional learning.

Seeking: 5-7 volunteers

Pay: \$50-100 accrues as the study progresses, up to \$100

Activity: Three 30–45-minute interviews.

Thank you for your consideration.

## Appendix E – Superintendent Request Letter



University Research  
Compliance Office

September 9, 2021

Superintendent of Schools

RE: Permission to Conduct Research Study

Dear,

I am writing to request permission to conduct a research study at USD..... School District. I am currently enrolled in the Curriculum and Instruction Doctoral Program at Kansas State University and am in the process of writing my doctoral thesis. My study is entitled *The Power of Place: Teachers' Perceptions on Effective Professional Development*. The goal of the research is to seek an understanding of how teachers' sense of place and their educational upbringing inform their perceptions on what is effective professional learning. My hope is to gain insight into the subtle nuances of how rural educators value their professional learning and as a result act on their new learning so that rural leaders will be better equipped in their future professional development efforts.

I hope that the district administration will allow me to conduct interviews from district teachers strictly on a voluntary basis. Interested staff members, who volunteer to participate, will be given a consent form to sign ensuring that all data collection and information shared will be kept confidential and anonymous in my analysis. All data will be securely stored in a password protected file on my computer. Should this study be published, only pooled results will be documented (no personal identifiers). No costs will be incurred by either your school/center or the individual participants.

If approval is granted, a request for permission to conduct the study will be sent to each school administrator for approval. If approval is granted, all teacher participants (strictly on a voluntary basis and with a stipend) will be asked to complete three separate interviews, ranging from 30-45 minutes.

Your approval to conduct this study and to speak with your building administrators will be greatly appreciated. Please reach out if you have any questions.

If you agree, kindly sign below and return the signed form to me.

Sincerely,

*Gwendolyn Jacobs*

Gwendolyn Jacobs  
Doctoral Candidate, KSU

Approved by:

---

Sign & Print your name

---

Title

---

Signature Date

## Appendix F – Building Leader Request Letter



September 9, 2021

RE: Permission to Conduct Research Study

Dear Building Administrator

I am writing to request permission to conduct a research study at your school building. I am currently enrolled in the Curriculum and Instruction Doctoral Program at Kansas State University and am in the process of writing my doctoral thesis. My study is entitled *The Power of Place: Teachers' Perceptions on Effective Professional Development*. The goal of the research is to seek an understanding of how teachers' sense of place and their educational upbringing inform their perceptions on what is effective professional learning. My hope is to gain insight into the subtle nuances of how rural educators value their professional learning and as a result act on their new learning so that rural leaders will be better equipped in their future professional development efforts.

I hope that the school administration will allow me to conduct interviews from your teachers strictly on a voluntary basis. Interested staff members, who volunteer to participate, will be given a consent form to sign ensuring that all data collection and information shared will be kept confidential and anonymous in my analysis. All data will be securely stored in a password protected file on my computer. Should this study be published, only pooled results will be documented (no personal identifiers). No costs will be incurred by either your school/center or the individual participants.

If approval is granted, teacher participants (strictly on a voluntary basis and with a \$50-\$100 stipend) will be asked to complete three separate interviews, ranging from 30-45 minutes.

Your approval to conduct this study will be greatly appreciated. Please reach out if you have any questions.

If you agree, kindly sign below and return the signed form to me.

Sincerely,

*Gwendolyn Jacobs*

Gwendolyn Jacobs  
Doctoral Candidate, KSU

Approved by:

---

Sign & Print your name

---

Title

---

Signature Date

## Appendix G – Recruiting Email

Afternoon Staff,

As some of you may know, I am in the process of completing my dissertation from KSU. My study is entitled *The Power of Place: Teachers' Perceptions on Effective Professional Development*. The goal of the research is to seek an understanding of how teachers' sense of place and their educational upbringing inform their perceptions on what is effective professional learning. My hope is to gain insight into the subtle nuances of how rural educators value their professional learning and as a result act on their new learning so that rural leaders (district, building etc) will be better equipped in their future professional development efforts. This study is of particular interest to the Rural Education Center at KSU: <https://coe.ksu.edu/academics/departments/rural-education-center/>

I am seeking 8-10 volunteers/participants to interview and who would be willing to share their experiences/stories as it relates to your professional learning. For the purpose of my data collection, the study will consist of three 30-minute interviews. Your name and any personal information will be anonymous, data will be kept confidential and destroyed upon the completion of the study. And you may withdraw at any time during the study.

**If you are interested, please fill out a quick three minute survey. Link:**  
<https://forms.gle/FGX67owxTxZFCHmXA>

Your willingness to participate is greatly appreciated!! I will be reaching out to those who complete the form.

Again thank you. Don't hesitate to call or email me for more information.

Gwendolyn



## Appendix H – Recruiting Email with Incentive

My name is Gwendolyn Jacobs, Executive Director of Teaching and Learning at \_\_\_\_\_. Currently, I am in the process of completing my dissertation from KSU. I am in the Curriculum and Instruction Doctoral Program. My study is entitled *The Power of Place: Teachers' Perceptions on Effective Professional Development*. With the permission of the superintendent and your building administrator, I am seeking a few participants for my study. My goal is to tell teachers' stories about their professional learning in hopes to better understand how to meet the needs of rural educators and rural students.

**Volunteers:** 3-4 Classroom Teacher/participants (2-10 years' experience preferred but not required)

**Activity:** Participate in 3 different interviews (30-45 min throughout the semester) about various experiences with professional development and about your experiences as a learner. No wrong answers, I promise! **(We can do this in person or through zoom)**

**Confidentiality:** Everything will be kept confidential including your participation in the study, all names and any personal identifiers. Data will be destroyed, once analyzed.

**Pay: \$50-\$100 - accrues as you complete each interview up to \$100 CASH - Nice Christmas Money**

\*NOTE: Participants reserve the right to end the study at any time.

**If you are interested, please fill out a quick two minute survey.**

**Link:** <https://forms.gle/FGX67owxTxZFCHmXA>

Your willingness to participate is greatly appreciated!! I will be reaching out to those who complete the form by the next day or two.

REMEMBER easy CASH & Participation is kept Confidential.

Again, thank you and don't hesitate to call or email me for more information. My direct number is