

## Career Changers as First-Year Teachers in Rural Schools

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*The challenges novice teachers face as they adjust to inservice teaching are well documented. However, relatively little attention has been given to beginning teachers in rural schools who have had previous careers in other professions. We used qualitative methods to examine the professional experiences and perceptions of four career-changing first-year teachers in rural schools, seeking to identify significant issues in their professional developmental processes. Three primary themes emerged: evidence of effectiveness as teachers; mentoring career changers, and; adjustment to rural school and community. We conclude with implications and recommendations for educators working to support this unique population of educators in preservice preparation programs and rural school districts.*

Palmer (1998) identified a primary issue associated with the isolated nature of teaching: "Compared to other professions, teaching has evolved very slowly because of its privatization. If surgery and the law were practiced as privately as teaching, we would still treat most patients with leeches and sink defendants in millponds" (p. 144). This isolation may also be a factor in high attrition rates among beginning teachers. Arnold (2002) suggested that high attrition is a result, in part, of "the isolation that many teachers experience beginning with their first day of teaching" (p. 124). Between 30% and 50% of new teachers in the United States leave the profession within the first three to five years (Luekens, Lytter, & Fox, 2004; Smith & Ingersoll, 2004). Isolation can seem more profound for new teachers in rural communities because of physical remoteness and the insularity of rural communities (Barley, 2009).

Efforts to support beginning teachers early in their careers often come in the form of induction programs. Characteristics of individual induction programs vary widely. Smith and Ingersoll (2004) analyzed the impact

of different elements of induction programs and identified the following combination as most effective: mentoring; supportive communication from an administrator; common planning time with other teachers in the grade or content area; participation in seminars for beginning teachers; and one of the following: a teacher's aide, reduced number of preparations, or participation in an external network of teachers.

Research suggests that effective induction programs for beginning teachers can enhance teacher retention (Chubbuck, Clift, Allard, & Quinlan, 2001; Smith & Ingersoll, 2004). However, attrition rates have remained relatively stable over the last two decades (Smith & Ingersoll, 2004). The overall stability in attrition rates may be due to induction programs being unavailable to 20% of new teachers (Smith & Ingersoll, 2004), or the induction programs that are offered may be inconsistent in quality or may not be configured to respond to the unique needs of individual teachers (Fry, 2007).

The challenges early career teachers face as they adjust to a profession are not uniform, and may even be further exacerbated by personal and professional isolation from their new colleagues. Teachers in rural schools are likely to face different challenges than their counterparts in urban schools (McCracken & Miller, 1988). As Eppley (2009) noted, "successful teaching in a rural school is different than successful teaching in other settings" (p. 1). The inherent physical and social characteristics of rural communities can result in novice teachers in rural areas experiencing unique and perhaps more profound isolation. In addition, beginning

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teachers who enter schools with previous professional experiences in non-educational environments may face different challenges than those novices who enter the career in their early twenties after completing an undergraduate education degree (Morton, Williams, & Brindley, 2006; Unruh & Holt, 2010; Wilson & Deaney, 2010). Thus, the combination of novice teachers beginning their educational careers in rural schools after previous non-educational careers may present a double challenge for many.

Reducing teacher attrition can decrease shortages of highly qualified teachers (Harrell, Leavell, van Tassel, & McKee, 2004), resulting in both enhanced student achievement (Wong, 2004) and higher levels of cost-effectiveness for the schools (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2005). Achieving such an outcome in part through effective induction programs requires a comprehensive understanding of the needs of beginning teachers in different contexts in order to identify ways to provide them with better support. To this end we undertook a year-long qualitative investigation of the experiences of four career-changing, first-year teachers who taught in rural high schools to examine this population's unique needs as early career teachers. We now turn to a review of relevant literature that framed this study.

### **Novice Teachers in Rural Schools**

During the first years of teaching, many newcomers question their career choice. Seemingly regardless of the quality of their preservice preparation programs or their personal suitability to the profession, conflicts often emerge between the idealism of new teachers and the practical realities of the complex demands of students, classrooms, and schools (Feiman-Nemser, 2003; Veenman, 1984). The typical beginning teacher faces challenges that at times seem insurmountable (Patterson, 2005; Veenman, 1984), which seems to lead to the attrition of 30% and 50% of new educators (Luekens et al., 2004; Smith & Ingersoll, 2004).

High attrition rates represent a poor use of time and resources for the individuals involved, as well as those of their school districts. The Alliance for Excellent Education (2005) estimated the annual cost of replacing teachers who leave the profession at \$2.2 billion. Teacher attrition is particularly problematic in rural school districts, which also struggle with greater initial recruitment challenges (Barley, 2009; Lowe, 2006). One contributing factor to rural district recruitment and retention issues is the personal and professional isolation too often experienced by new teachers.

For example, a small rural high school's new physics teacher or special educator is unlikely to have a colleague at that school with similar professional background and

training. In addition, the physical remoteness of rural communities and the likelihood that existing faculty social networks have been established over decades often further amplify the new teacher's sense of separation (Barley, 2009). One approach to address attrition in rural school districts is a collaborative effort from both teacher preparation programs and P-12 school systems to better understand the needs of new teachers, and subsequently to implement individualized strategies to ease the induction of new teachers into the profession and retain highly qualified teachers (Barley, 2009; Lowe, 2006).

Significant issues can emerge when new non-traditional teachers begin their careers in rural communities after having lived in large cities and completed student teaching assignments in large urban high schools. The characteristics and challenges unique to rural schools may catch these new teachers unprepared and off guard (McCracken & Miller, 1988). Rural teachers must learn the specific culture not only of their new school, but also of the rural community itself (Eppley, 2009). Rural communities are tightly sociologically linked to their schools in ways not typical of urban areas (McCracken & Miller, 1988).

The people who live in rural areas often have deep attachments to their communities (Woodrum, 2009), with their schools standing as important symbols of the community. Effective teaching (Eppley, 2009) and leadership (Budge, 2006) in rural areas require that educators recognize and respect this unique sociological dynamic. Teacher preparation programs that place significant numbers of preservice teachers in rural communities do these individuals a disservice without substantial focus on rural conditions (Barley, 2009) and place consciousness (White & Reid, 2008).

### **Career Changers**

To more successfully prepare highly qualified and effective teachers, some colleges and universities have implemented programs culminating in initial teacher certification at the post-baccalaureate level. Often those who enroll in these programs are older, non-traditional students with rich and varied life experiences that might include domestic and/or foreign travel, parenthood, and previous careers outside schools (Morton et al., 2006). Armed with greater maturity and significant life skills compared to traditional college-aged students, an implicit assumption is that these non-traditional teacher education candidates may be especially well-suited for "fast track" professional induction (Morton et al., 2006).

However, the idea that non-traditionally trained teachers can forgo induction programs with no ill effects is not well-supported in the professional literature. Teachers

prepared and inducted through fast track routes to teaching often have higher rates of teacher attrition than those prepared through traditional programs (Darling-Hammond, 2003). While some career changers do smoothly negotiate their new role as teachers, others encounter unexpected roadblocks to success in the schools (Morton et al., 2006). Indeed, recently researchers have concluded that, although their support needs may be different, alternatively trained career-changers still benefit from ongoing induction support (Elliott, Isaacs, & Chugani, 2010; Foote, Brantlinger, Haydar, Smith, & Gonzalez, 2011; Wilcox & Samaras, 2009).

Individuals who move into teaching after previous professional careers may struggle with unstated and subtle yet powerful dimensions of school culture (Morton et al., 2006). Despite their maturity and real world experiences, they nevertheless may require explicit professional guidance to most effectively connect and adapt skills from their previous professional roles to their new positions in the schools (Chambers, 2002; Wilson & Deaney, 2010) to help avoid a confusing and unpleasant “collision of cultures” (Morton et al., 2006).

For example, Wilson and Deaney (2010) reported on an aspiring science teacher with a Ph.D. in biochemical engineering and subsequent work experience in that field. She abandoned her dream of being a teacher when she found that the disparity between her expectations for herself as a teacher and her students’ performance were irreconcilable with what she experienced in the classroom. In some cases non-traditional teachers are deeply invested in maintaining the status quo (defined as the classrooms that they themselves had experienced perhaps decades earlier as students). Such issues may be especially common for teachers coming from former military backgrounds (Chambers, 2002).

Other career-changing novice teachers see teaching as a chance to actualize their vision of school reform. Teacher education programs that target non-traditional students often promote agendas of reform, encouraging their students to envision themselves as future change agents (Morton et al., 2006). However, this philosophical orientation can create tensions for new teachers as they enter school communities with well-established and hierarchical social and bureaucratic systems (Morton et al., 2006). Levine (2010) suggested that school cultures tend to expect new members of the community to “begin at the margins,” with a tacit expectation that they should spend an appropriate period of time observing and getting to know the “rules and rituals of the society” (p.119) before they speak out. Teachers who violate this expectation may meet resistance. Conversely, some administrators assume older novice teachers may be ideal for special assignments designed to bring change to existing systems. Such expectations may put these new

teachers in untenable positions with colleagues and parents (Morton et al., 2006).

The challenges new teachers face, the complexity of teaching in rural schools, and issues unique to career changing teachers are all well documented in the literature. However, the relationships between these three dimensions are less well-understood. When trying to determine why some new career-changing teachers find success in rural school environments when others do not, a number of questions emerge. Which professional dispositions gained from previous work experiences are especially helpful or harmful in a new career teaching in rural schools? How might alternative teacher preparation programs that target non-traditional candidates better prepare teachers for work in rural schools? How might rural schools support teachers in their ongoing professional induction? Concerned about these issues, and eager to help identify ways to better support this unique population of early career teachers, we designed this investigation to examine the experiences of career-changing, first-year teachers who were beginning their education careers in rural schools after completion of initial teacher certification programs at the post-baccalaureate level.

### **Context for the Study**

The four participants in this qualitative study each completed a non-traditional post-baccalaureate teaching certification program at a metropolitan university in the northwest United States. The state has large wilderness areas and a sparse population, most of which is concentrated in one large urban area and several smaller urban areas. Much of the state is characterized by small towns in remote regions. As a result, the state has several large urban school districts and many more small rural districts (the smallest of which has a total student population of 13). Most new teachers completing the certification program seek positions in the larger school districts. However, these districts typically have a significantly greater number of qualified applicants than they have positions. Thus, new teachers often secure their first teaching jobs in rural areas.

The teaching certification program was specifically designed to appeal to career-changing adult learners. Students enter the program after having completed the required courses for their content areas, and then proceed through the professional education coursework as a cohort. The program is completed in three consecutive semesters (including one summer), and culminates in a full semester of student teaching (typically in the university’s urban area). The cohort nature of the program, including shared classes and school experiences, results in a substantial sense of community among preservice teachers. Despite the greater

opportunities available to graduates for employment in rural communities, the program does not offer a specific focus on preparation for teaching in rural schools.

### Methods

We used qualitative methods to examine the professional experiences of four career-changing, first-year teachers in rural schools. Phenomenological perspectives helped us to understand the experiences of these first-year teachers (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994). As we were interested in looking at the experiences of a specific group of beginning teachers, we used convenience sampling to recruit participants from a cohort of nine newly certified teachers who completed the post-baccalaureate teacher preparation program in spring 2009. Four of the potential participants ultimately obtained teaching positions in rural schools. Each agreed to participate in the study.

We individually interviewed the four participants in three or more lengthy interviews (Merriam, 1998). The interviews were recorded and subsequently transcribed by a graduate research assistant. Additional data collection included observations in three of the teachers' classrooms followed by debriefing meetings about the observations. We also informally communicated with their principals or supervisors (except for one, Sandra,<sup>1</sup> who asked us not to do so) regarding the participants' progress as teachers. This process generated additional insights. Throughout the data collection process we used memos (Miles & Huberman, 1994) to record emerging hunches and thoughts about the data as the study unfolded.

Additionally, we engaged in reflexive writing and conversations to methodically explore our own thinking about the emerging information (Kleinsasser, 2000). Our approach was influenced by Peshkin (1998), who noted the inevitable subjectivity of data collection and recommended that researchers "systematically seek out their subjectivity ... while their research is in progress ... so they are aware of how their subjectivity may be shaping their inquiry and its outcomes" (p. 17). Reflexive conversations and writing allowed us to explore how our own impressions and background influenced our interpretations of the data. To this end we note that we have 15 and 29 years of teaching and teacher education experience, respectively. One of us spent several years teaching in rural schools, and both of us have worked extensively in rural schools with preservice and inservice teachers. Additionally, we both have engaged in previous research seeking to identify more effective ways to support beginning teachers during the induction process. We acknowledge having strong views about the critical importance of this time in a teacher's career.

The primary data sources for the study were the transcriptions and field notes from classroom observations. The graduate research assistant (a successful high school teacher with over 10 years of experience in the classroom) who transcribed the interviews also contributed to this phase of data analysis by identifying those data points that stood out to her as especially revealing. Her initial analysis helped us identify codes (and later themes) describing the essence of the participants' experiences as first-year teachers in rural schools. We used these quotes to develop grounded codes to describe the data (Gibbs & Taylor, 2005).

These codes emerged from the participants' experiences rather than through a priori expectations. We met eight times during the analysis process to discuss data and identify themes. As each participant in this study had unique experiences as a first-year teacher, we did not find themes that collectively explained the data. Instead, we identified three major themes that underscore similarities and differences among these four career-changing beginning teachers in rural schools in our study: evidence of effectiveness as teachers; mentoring career changers, and; adjustment to rural school and community.

To enhance the fundamental credibility of our emergent conclusions, we engaged in member checking (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007) by providing participants with the opportunity to review findings and offer feedback regarding whether or not their experiences were accurately analyzed and described. The participants confirmed that their experiences were portrayed accurately. They offered additional reflections about their experiences and the themes that emerged from the data that we subsequently incorporated into our work. In the section that follows, we provide portraits of each participant and a description of the schools in which they taught.

### Participant Portraits and School Contexts

#### Christina

Christina is in her early forties, and she struck us as an energetic extrovert. After receiving her master's degree in social sciences, she worked at a variety of jobs, none of which directly utilized her academic preparation. In the past Christina had periodically toyed with the idea of becoming a teacher. After working in a preschool and substitute teaching, she concluded that teaching was indeed the right career for her.

Christina and her family have been firmly established for ten years in a rural mountain community of about 2,500 people in the Pacific Northwest. About 35% of the students in her home school district receive free or reduced lunches,

<sup>1</sup> All names used for study participants are pseudonyms.

and about 80% of graduates pursue a post-secondary education program. About 96% of the students are White, and 2% are Hispanic.

When she began her post-baccalaureate teacher certification program, Christina knew exactly what she wanted: a teaching position in her home community. Unlike the other three members of this study who completed their student teaching experiences in large high schools, Christina student taught in her hometown. After completing the certification program, Christina, who was also certified to teach social studies, was hired as an English Language Learner (ELL) teacher and district coordinator for ELL services. She was assigned to work in four schools, covering grades K-12.

### **Tom**

Tom is a sincere, thoughtful, and intellectually inclined young man in his early thirties who grew up in a rural community. He followed his early academic training in chemistry by working in a chemistry lab, a choice that he later concluded made him miserable. Tom always wanted to be a teacher. Encouraged by his supportive wife, Tom did not hesitate to enroll once he found a post-baccalaureate education program that allowed him to work toward certification while continuing to work as a lab chemist.

After completing the program, Tom was hired to teach chemistry and biology in a high school with 1,000 students located in a town of about 11,000 people. It is important to note that although the community's population technically classifies it as an urban area, few residents would describe it as such. A short 10-minute drive from the center of town brings a person to wide expanses of rural areas and federally-owned public lands. Another characteristic that contributes to the non-urban feel of this community is that the nearest town of more than a few hundred people is almost an hour away. Demographically the community is largely lower-middle class, and primarily White. The largest minority group is Hispanic at 8% of the overall population of the community. About 90% of the high school graduates go on to post-secondary educational programs.

### **Sandra**

Sandra is in her early thirties, and she presents herself as an exuberant idealist. She grew up in a large city and attended a private religious high school with other high-achieving students. Following her college graduation she worked for ten years in business. She then returned to the university to prepare herself to be a secondary English teacher because she believed that teaching would be more personally and professionally fulfilling than her business career.

Sandra and her family now live in a metropolitan area with a population of about 500,000. She completed her student teaching in one of the large high schools in that area. After finishing, Sandra hoped to secure a teaching position in a school similar to where she had student taught. Ultimately she was hired to teach at a small high school in a rural community of about 2,500 people, which was an hour-long commute from her home. The high school has an enrollment of about 500 students, 40% of whom receive free or reduced lunches. Approximately 80% of the students are White, and 17% are Hispanic. About 70% of the high school's graduates go on to post-secondary education programs.

### **Kevin**

Kevin is a self-possessed and somewhat reserved man in his early forties with a strong academic background in mathematics from a prestigious university in the east. Kevin loves the outdoors and prefers living in a rural area. He attended a small high school with a graduating class of about 80. After earning his baccalaureate degree, Kevin moved through several professional positions. His least favorite of these was as an office manager, where he worked in a confined space for eleven hours a day. His final non-education position was one he enjoyed because it drew on his love of nature. When that position ended he decided to become a high school mathematics teacher.

While completing his certification Kevin taught college math courses. After student teaching at a large urban high school, he was hired to teach mathematics in a rural high school with an enrollment of 200 in a remote community with a population near 2,000. In this economically impoverished area, approximately 96% of the students in the district receive free or reduced lunches. Approximately 50% of the students are Hispanic, and 50% are White. About 75% of the district's high school graduates enroll in post-secondary education programs.

## **Findings**

We present the findings for each participant individually and, in the discussion section that follows, examine the similarities and differences among participants with regard to the three major themes.

### **Christina**

In her interviews with us, Christina reported feeling at home in the rural school community right away. This likely was supported by her place-based preparation. Although her teacher preparation institution did not have an emphasis on rural schools, her experiences allowed her to have three of

the five experiences Barley (2009) described as helpful for rural-bound teachers. Specifically, Christina was prepared in multiple (two) content areas, had student taught in a rural area (the same one in which she had lived for more than a decade and in which she had hoped to obtain a teaching position), and understood the role of the community in a rural school.

Christina believed that her student teaching in the community “helped me immensely, [with] all sorts of things, like establishing relationships with other teachers and getting to know the students. I think it opened doors because people knew who I was.” After obtaining a teaching position in the same district, her deep ties to the community and interpersonal skills that reflected her understanding of local demands and needs (Shagrir, 2010) helped Christina smoothly and successfully settle into her school community.

Christina was also supported through a district policy that provided her with an official mentor and a supervisor, both of whom were people she could turn to with questions. Within a few months, Christina’s outgoing nature led her to develop strong collegial ties with two additional educators who provided further mentoring. These relationships may have provided her with more authentic mentoring because of the mutuality of the relationship (Beyene, Anglin, Sanchez, & Ballou, 2002; Fry, 2007). Thus, Christina’s successful adjustment to her position was facilitated by her preparatory experiences, comfort in her rural community, her outgoing nature, and a formal and informal mentoring network.

### **Tom**

Like Christina, Tom also settled into his teaching position in a rural community with relative ease. Lacking Christina’s place-based preparation, Tom found success through a different set of experiences. Tom’s first months as a teacher were characterized by unusual circumstances that would ultimately contribute to his sense of success. After completing the post-baccalaureate teacher certification program, he was unable to obtain a full-time teaching position. Instead, he was hired the day before the school year began, teaching part time in two large high schools in an urban district. Assigned to teach multiple content areas outside of his certification area, the position itself was challenging. Tom also struggled to identify faculty or staff members who could help him gain access to such practical instructional necessities as keys to classroom doors and cabinets, a copy of the curriculum, or a password so he could use the district’s electronic grading and attendance system.

Due to an unanticipated vacancy in a rural school district, nearly two months into the school year Tom was offered a full-time position teaching high school chemistry

and biology. Although he was pleased by the opportunity, Tom hesitated to accept the position because he did not want to leave his current employers in a difficult situation. Tom met with his supervisors to let them know about the offer. They acknowledged that Tom had a family to support. Since his supervisors did not anticipate being able to offer him a full-time position in the near future, they supported Tom’s decision to accept the full-time position at the rural school.

Despite his late start and the challenge of teaching students who had had a tumultuous beginning to the school year that included three weeks of substitute teachers, Tom quickly found his sense of place and success in the rural school community. His first day at his new school coincided with a professional development day. Unlike his isolated beginning at his first school, Tom was greeted with an outpouring of help and support. A group of colleagues spent the day helping Tom assess the mountain of student papers that were collected during the three weeks of substitute teachers that preceded his arrival at the school. His colleagues helped him become familiar with the school computer programs, curriculum, and even shared their instructional materials.

Significantly, the teachers did this out of their own initiative to help their new colleague. They had not been asked to do this by the school’s administration. Bolstered by this support from his new colleagues, Tom was able to focus on his teaching and relationships with students. He quickly found the feelings of success that were missing in his first position. Within two weeks of Tom’s arrival, his principal received phone calls from happy parents reporting that their children felt comfortable with Tom. The principal described one of Tom’s greatest strengths as his “ability to connect with kids in a hurry.”

Although Tom’s school district did not provide him with a formal mentor, the same colleagues who helped him assess the student papers on his first day quickly became an informal mentoring network, the members of which shared their collective resources and wisdom with him. Tom consistently commented on his high level of respect for his principal, and noted with approval the positive environment and collegial relationships at the school that were facilitated by the administration. Thus, after surviving almost two months of teaching part time in the two urban schools where he experienced the lack of support that Patterson (2005) referred to as “hazing,” Tom ultimately adjusted to his first year of teaching with ease. Near the end of the year he reflected on the rough beginning to his first year of teaching and the doubts it instilled:

It seems like I’m the same person, so it must be the surroundings. The different things that people might have a hard time [with during] their first year, they might think they’re not cut out for

[teaching] or something. And maybe they are, but maybe they should consider getting into different situations.

Because of Tom's personable nature and his switch to a "different situation" filled with supportive colleagues and a principal whose leadership style fostered a positive school community, he found success. Tom became absorbed into the small high school where he easily built relationships with colleagues, students, and parents. Although Tom had not initially sought a position in a rural school, after being there he concluded (somewhat to his surprise) that his personality and teaching style were better suited to the intimacy of a rural school than to a large urban school.

### **Sandra**

In contrast to Christina and Tom, Sandra reported greater challenges in adjusting to her new rural teaching position. When hired, she was explicitly asked to develop and implement a senior project. The challenge of implementing a substantial educational change seemed to contribute to the difficulties she faced in her adjustment as a first-year teacher in an isolated rural school. Sandra's voice often echoed the research literature that describes the induction year as a time where challenges seem insurmountable. In early December she explained, "Three weeks ago I was completely overwhelmed. I just didn't know how I was going to get through this." She reported often getting only four hours of sleep a night and feeling like she was simply waiting for the next school break to get caught up on sleep and work.

Sandra also concluded that her high overall academic expectations created tension between her and her students, particularly those who were seniors. In her own background as a student she had attended exclusive private schools, distinguishing herself there with high academic achievement. She carried similar expectations for high academic achievement for her students. Believing that she was expected to set higher academic standards for her students than had been the case in the past, she tenaciously stuck to her rigorous expectations, even when she met with resistance from students, parents, and the principal. This tension persisted throughout the school year. From our perspective Sandra seemed to spend time developing and implementing a rigorous senior project at the expense of getting to know her students as individuals, building rapport, and helping them feel safe in her classroom. It is not that she asked too much of her students; rather, it seems she asked too much too soon without first establishing a positive relationship. It is worth noting that out of concern for her well-being and a desire to help her succeed in reaching her students (Newkirk, 1996), we offered assistance during

her difficult adjustment to teaching. She was reluctant to accept, in part because of how overwhelmed and busy she was with mere survival. Although Sandra declined our offer to visit her classroom, she did express appreciation for the chance to air her frustrations and concerns to us in the phone interviews, presumably because we were fellow educators who knew schools but had no supervisory oversight of her.

Sandra's lack of specific personal and professional preparation for rural schools and communities unfortunately may have intensified her stress as a first-year teacher. Sandra seemed to struggle to understand the close-knit relationships between schools and communities that characterize life in many rural settings. The informality of rural schools often results in unofficial evaluations of new teachers by the veterans of the school. Although these initial subjective analyses first emerge within the schools, the nature of the deep fundamental "interconnectedness" of rural school and rural community results in these informal teacher assessments quickly spreading throughout the community (McCracken & Miller, 1988). Sandra was dismayed to find herself dealing with angry students, parents, and colleagues who seemed to speak in a unified voice as they questioned her teaching decisions.

She also concluded that there was a downside to a community having such intimate and extensive ties with its schools. What she perceived as the community's inappropriately large impact on school policy, including academic issues, was an unexpected personal and professional issue for her. Sandra concluded that excessive community involvement in school governance generated the substantial resistance she encountered over time as she sought to academically "raise the bar" in terms of achievement expectations of her students.

Although Sandra never fully adjusted to her rural place, over time she began to better understand the nature of the rural community in which she taught, including a greater appreciation of the advantages of life in a small community. She noted that the rural town felt like a safe family community, one where people cared deeply about its young people and its school. Despite the issues she encountered, Sandra's contract was renewed, and she decided to return for a second year. Her adjustment to rural community is ongoing.

### **Kevin**

As was the case with Sandra, Kevin was asked to implement significant educational change, specifically to advance the math curriculum. And as also was the case with Sandra, Kevin struggled to adjust to this as he began his first teaching position. Since students in his high school were tracked by ability levels, Kevin's instructional responsibilities included teaching four sections of math to

some of the lowest achieving students in the school. He felt underprepared to motivate these youth, many of whom had documented learning disabilities and a history of low achievement in math. Kevin described his frustration in working with this population and his unsuccessful efforts to reverse their pattern of poor performance.

Kevin reported working hard on his lesson plans, and trying to use his (admittedly dry) sense of humor to create examples and story problems to better engage his struggling learners. He sought to treat all his students with respect, for example by including information about their personal interests in his instruction and other interactions with them. Ultimately, however, he seemed puzzled by and resigned to the failure of his low-performing students.

As was the case with Sandra, his academic expectations for his students were high. When he was hired, Kevin was explicitly instructed to implement a more rigorous curriculum than had been in place in the past. Additionally, Kevin was hired to coach two team sports, an unexpected assignment that took a tremendous amount of time during the fall and early winter. His daily planning for teaching was very time consuming, and much of his after school time was devoted to coaching responsibilities. Like Sandra he often felt overwhelmed and exhausted.

Although it was demanding, coaching also provided considerable personal and professional satisfaction and achievement for Kevin in his new career. A former student-athlete himself, he was comfortable coaching despite the time demands. He concluded that coaching helped him build rapport with the student-athletes who were in his classes: "I think it helped a lot, particularly with some. People had said 'watch out for this kid,' but I haven't had any problem with the ones on the team." Coaching also put Kevin into a prominent place in the rural community where he taught; at times the attention was helpful as it helped him connect to the community. Other times he lamented the pressure parents often exuded regarding his decisions about who to play and who not to play.

Coaching also helped Kevin connect with some other teachers; his support network at school almost entirely consisted of the other coaches with whom he usually ate lunch each day. Unfortunately, he was never assigned a mentor who might have provided instructional guidance and feedback. In short, Kevin lacked the professional mentoring and connection to place that helped Tom and Christina adjust to their first year of teaching with relative ease, although coaching did help him bond with some students.

### Discussion

Our analysis of interviews and observations of these four beginning teachers revealed similarities and differences within three major themes: evidence of effectiveness as

teachers, mentoring career changers, adjustment to a rural school and community. In the discussion that follows, we examine how the participants' backgrounds, personal outlook, and school contexts contributed to the differences between our participants with regards to these themes.

### Evidence of Effectiveness as Teachers

In the findings, Christina and Tom stand out as more successful first-year teachers compared to Kevin and Sandra. We suggest that their abilities to self-identify evidence of their effectiveness contributed to their self efficacy as teachers, a factor associated with resiliency and persistence among teachers (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2001; Yost, 2006). For example, early in the school year Christina was able to self-identify effective elements of her teaching. This ability helped her build professional and personal confidence. Her strong work ethic and belief that she could "change the world" likely influenced her sense of self efficacy and resulting confidence about her teaching.

As the only ELL teacher in a rural district with three schools, Christina was able to structure her own schedule, a type of professional autonomy not experienced by many teachers. For Christina this resulted in a refusal to have a preparation period even though she had extensive paperwork requirements because "my kids need my help." Her dedication was commendable, although her extensive work hours led us to be concerned that her efforts would not be sustainable. What we instead came to see was that Christina developed a commendable adaptation skill in which she became proficient at completing paperwork and planning efficiently right after school, allowing her to devote her considerable energies during school hours to working directly with her students. Early in the year she identified her two greatest strengths as a teacher: her ability to help students develop self esteem, and her commitment to honoring students' home cultures. Her self confidence and the resulting growth in her self efficacy, along with her conviction in the importance of her work, kept her going despite the challenges of being a first-year teacher.

Tom was similarly able to identify evidence of success early on in his career. After less than a month in his full-time position, he described feeling confident that he was teaching a high-quality chemistry course. Tom's students were "doing really good chemistry" on exams. He reflected:

The course is as good for the students as it is for me. I'm not just sweeping it under the rug as a first-year teacher – "Well they have to sacrifice the first year to help me learn, and *then* I'll be a better teacher, and it'll be a good course for them [next year]."



His principal and colleagues also provided praise and support, and this feedback seemed to contribute to his increased confidence and self efficacy as a teacher.

In contrast to Christina and Tom, Sandra and Kevin were less able to self identify evidence of their effectiveness. Sandra weathered a storm of complaints during her first year of teaching. Exhausted and discouraged, she maintained her high expectations of students even when criticisms from students and parents mounted. At a low point during the year she expressed self-doubt: "I don't even know if I'm a good teacher or not. I'm having fun with them, but I have no idea what my strengths are right now."

Sandra's discouragement and inability to self-assess her performance as a teacher seemed to go hand in hand. At one of her lowest points she wondered about her struggles: "Is it because I'm new? Is it because I don't fit right?" At the end of the school year, she finally got a much-needed indicator of success: many of her students did excellent work for their senior projects. Overall, though, Sandra's lonely first year was filled with self-doubt and criticism.

Kevin's main indicator of effective teaching came from the academic growth of the students in his two advanced classes. As he noted, "One of [the classes] was a little rocky at first, but those are great now. Everybody has A's and B's. Not just that. Everyone's doing really well, so I can have fun." Kevin's feelings of success in these advanced classes were unfortunately counterbalanced by the poor performance in his four classes of low-level algebra. No matter what approach he tried, a number of students seemed to only expend the minimal effort required to earn a grade of D. Said Kevin, "It always surprises me the things they don't know. [For example,] they have a hard time with how many feet are in a yard." When progress reports were due, he had to enlist the Spanish interpreter to make twenty calls to parents to tell them their children were failing, a professional challenge he had not expected.

He seemed to struggle with what Wiggins and McTighe (2005) referred to as the expert blind spot. That is, while Kevin's affection and affinity for math made it relatively easy for him to teach his two sections of advanced math, he lacked insight into how to help struggling students understand the mathematical concepts that came so easily to him. In order to achieve true success as a teacher, Kevin needs to develop skills to help motivate all of his students and reach those with a history of low achievement in mathematics.

Christina and Tom had evidence that they were becoming effective teachers through a variety of indicators. Meanwhile, Kevin and Sandra struggled and were less able to identify specific evidence of success, perhaps because those indicators were slower to develop. Both were asked to implement educational reform at their schools, and this led them to have a shared commitment to rigorous academic

standards. Although they cared about their students, we suggest that Kevin and Sandra focused on implementing academic reform at the expense of building rapport with their students. Christina and Tom also had high standards, but their student-centered approach to teaching seemed to foster a sense of partnership in their efforts to increase student academic achievement while Kevin and Sandra seemed more distant from their students.

As teachers in small schools in rural communities, all four participants' teaching effectiveness (or lack thereof) was highly visible and public. For two of our participants, the highly visible nature of teaching in rural schools seemed to enhance the path they were already on: Tom received external praise from parents and his principal, and this helped him continue to progress as a successful teacher. In contrast, although questioned by students, parents, and her principal (and at times by herself), Sandra never wavered in her conviction that she was leading students on the correct academic path. Although this contrasting response to external feedback is undoubtedly reflects Sandra's and Tom's different personalities, it is also noteworthy that Tom received mentoring while Sandra did not. Thus, we move onto discuss another theme: mentoring career changers.

### **Mentoring Career Changers**

Two of our participants benefited from mentoring: Tom and Christina. Both were receptive to mentoring, in part because they recognized they were still learning the art of teaching. As Mager (1992) explained, "after preservice preparation, the experience of becoming a teacher continues into the inservice years of a teacher's career. A teacher continues to learn about teaching as the practice is carried out" (p. 4). In contrast, Sandra and Kevin both perceived themselves as more advanced than the typical first-year teacher, a stance we suggest made them less likely to see themselves as still learning to teach and may have inhibited their interactions with colleagues who might have served as informal mentors.

Tom's view of himself as a career changer seemed to contribute to his openness to mentoring. He believed that his previous professional experience as a chemist was an asset in the classroom because it helped him fundamentally understand the application and process of science, facilitating effective answers to such student questions as, "How do they know that?" Tom also noted that his previous career did little to prepare him for other aspects of teaching because his previous work in the chemistry lab

was fairly socially isolated and closely managed. Things like course planning, pacing, creating a scope for a course were all very new to me. My industry experience was so different from the

classroom. This new [pedagogical] skill set had to be learned.

Tom pragmatically recognized both the contributions and the limits of his previous experience to his new career, and as a result he was open to feedback from the teachers who reached out to him.

Tom also benefitted from assistance with teaching biology, since this was not his area of expertise. One of his colleagues who also taught a section of biology provided extensive support for him by sharing interactive PowerPoints, labs, and other materials. The teacher encouraged Tom to keep his biology class a day behind hers so she could share resources and help guide him. This collegial support and Tom's willingness to accept it helped him be a confident and effective teacher early in his career.

Christina also saw herself as learning as a first-year teacher, although she was more confident with pedagogical skills than Tom because of her experience as a substitute teacher and preschool teacher. However, she still was learning ELL pedagogy. Although this was one of two areas in which she was certified, Christina took all of her ELL coursework during her teacher preparation program. She felt more prepared in her other certification area because she had an undergraduate and graduate degree in that content. A self-proclaimed lifelong learner, Christina readily accepted guidance from her officially assigned mentor. This classroom teacher worked in one of the schools that Christina served, and she was a helpful source of information about the school's culture. Christina was quick to seek out additional mentoring, however, as the official relationship did not meet all of her needs. She connected with another specialist in the district who was able to provide guidance navigating the demands of serving every school in the district, interacting with multiple administrators, and making accommodations for her diverse students. Christina also considered ELL faculty at her teacher-preparation institution resources and turned to them with specific content questions. Like Tom, Christina was open to ongoing learning and thus was receptive to mentoring as a career changer.

Sandra and Kevin had different experiences as neither was officially or unofficially mentored at their schools. Neither sought out mentoring in the way Christina did. Kevin met occasionally with his school's other full-time math teacher, who Kevin described as "really good when we talk about stuff." However, their meetings were infrequent. Sandra saw herself as having a different philosophy from other teachers, and she deliberately set herself apart socially and professionally. In the absence of like-minded colleagues in her school with whom she felt she could collaborate, Sandra relied on skills that had previously served her well in the business world. Specifically, she noted that she sought to focus intensely and independently on her job.

Sandra and Kevin both decided they were different from (specifically, professionally more advanced) the typical first-year teacher, which is consistent with Morton et al.'s (2006) description of career changers. We speculate that this perspective may have led them to be less likely than Christina and Tom to seek out or accept informal offers of mentoring from colleagues.

For Kevin, confidence that he was different from most first-year teachers was the result of six years of tutoring and teaching math as an adjunct at the university level. He was confident in his ability to effectively deliver math content to his students. However, he had concerns about classroom management. As he explained,

I was probably better prepared than someone who would just come into college would be. The teaching was never anything that I was worried about. It's the other stuff that you have to do that's a lot of work for me: classroom management and behavior stuff. Stuff that you have to do in the classroom that's not really teaching.

His perspective that classroom management is not teaching is problematic, and stands in contrast to Tom's recognition of the importance of learning pedagogical skills.

Like Kevin, Sandra was clear that her previous life and career experiences significantly differentiated her from other first-year teachers. After reflecting about how hard teaching was and her uncertainty about whether she was doing a good job, she commented:

But I also think I'm a lot better than a lot of first-year teachers. I'm not green. I'm not right out of college. I've had a career in banking, and I've been a dance teacher, and I've had my own business, and I know what these kids need to be prepared. I'm not a 23-year-old kid.

This sense of confidence that she was better prepared than her younger typical first-year teacher counterparts may have helped to bolster her during a challenging year. However, we speculate that this mindset may have contributed to Sandra's isolation from colleagues who may have been able to help her adjust to teaching in a rural school and community with a well-established culture and social practices. This stance contributed to complexities that are discussed further in the section that follows.

### **Adjustment to a Rural School and Community**

Two of our participants, Christina and Kevin, specifically wanted to teach in rural communities. Tom was open to teaching in a rural or urban community, and Sandra

would have preferred a position in an urban school. Existing comfort and ease with rural communities was an advantage for three of our participants as they had positive experiences living in rural communities in their youth, adulthood, or both. The exception here was Sandra, where the combination of being new to a rural community and having a professional approach to her teaching that was heavily influenced by her years of business experience created many tensions. With time Sandra came to understand the psycho-social dynamics of her new work environment of the unique rural school/community environment, explaining:

It's extremely hard to be a first-year teacher because they don't take change and new teachers well here. Once you're embedded and accepted, you're fine. They'll accept the way you do things ... but until [you are accepted] in the community... you have to struggle.

We cannot help but speculate that Sandra's adjustment difficulties in the rural school may have been worsened by her decision to live in an urban area and commute. While such a decision may have seemed easier for her initially, we wondered if this may in fact have further served to keep Sandra separated from her students, work, and school, particularly since she had limited or no experience in rural communities prior to her first year of teaching.

In contrast, Tom also commuted instead of living in the rural community in which he taught, but he did not have a similar level of separation. We suggest that his student-centered approach to teaching and previous background living in rural communities allowed him to adjust to the rural school and community with greater ease than Sandra. As his successful entry into teaching in his community led to praise from parents and administrators, adjustment to the rural community was not an issue as he quickly found his stride as a teacher.

Kevin liked living in a rural community, but he did not seem to assimilate into the community itself. It was unclear to us whether Kevin ultimately felt successful as a teacher in a rural setting. We began to wonder if perhaps the issue was that, while he may be attracted to rural environments, he may not be as well-suited to teaching in a rural culture. As it was difficult to separate Kevin's difficulty learning to reach his low-achieving students from other issues, we conclude that Kevin's adjustment to teaching in a rural community is ongoing.

In Christina's case, consistent with the literature (Barley, 2009; Shagrir, 2010), place-based preparation and rural background supported her successful induction to inservice teaching. She had place consciousness (White

& Reid, 2008) as a result of being a community resident for a decade and was able to use her familiarity with the rural area to help her students achieve academically. For example, bringing her daughter to dance class turned into an opportunity to extend her teaching because she encountered one of her students at the class. Another student lived near her home, and Christina often invited her over for help with homework. Christina had no need to adjust to her rural school and community, and her experiences exemplify points made in the literature about place-based preparation for rural teachers (Barley, 2009; White & Reid, 2008).

### **Implications and Recommendations**

Teacher induction is a complicated experience that is unique for each teacher. Through this inquiry into the experiences of four members of the relatively unstudied population of first-year, career-changing teachers in rural schools, we were able to identify implications and initial recommendations for teacher educators and rural school district administrators to consider.

#### **Implications: Career Changers**

Our participants concluded that their overall greater maturity and their various previous non-educational careers had enhanced their initial entry into their new profession. Such potentially generalizable career skills as professional flexibility and successful establishment of productive adult working relationships, combined with an overall greater level of personal maturity, helped two participants, Tom and Christina, adjust more successfully to their new roles in the classroom.

However, this previous career experience may have a potential pitfall, as evidenced by Kevin and Sandra's experiences. As Morton et al. (2006) indicated, new teachers who enter a school with a history of significant professional accomplishments and a variety of life experiences outside of the educational system may perceive themselves as more experienced and "school-savvy" than their new colleagues do. In fact, these more mature beginning teachers may have been hired by administrators who then have elevated professional expectations of them because of their more extensive career backgrounds.

That Sandra was hired to be a change agent and then encountered difficulty reflects the potential for problems when a beginning teacher is asked to implement change, as school cultures tend to expect beginners to ease their way into the profession. Although Sandra's uniquely personal approach and outlook may have contributed in part to her struggles, her experience illustrates the potential for new

teachers to meet opposition and failure within the school and the community when they are expected to be agents of significant school change.

Often career-changing teachers enter schools seeking a sense of personal and/or professional fulfillment not found in their previous work experiences (Chambers, 2002). While their initial optimism and energy are invaluable, these individuals may also possess idealized and unrealistic views of the rewards that teaching offers (Chambers, 2002; Morton, et al., 2006). The inevitable onset of reality in the contemporary classroom may cause distress.

In addition, career-changers are more likely to have held positions of authority (either as parents or work supervisors) than their younger novice colleagues. For those coming from previous careers where they experienced significant personal and professional autonomy, the adjustment to a school hierarchy may feel like a demotion. In such cases their previous life experiences may actually serve to inhibit their professional induction (Morton et al., 2006).

**Recommendations.** Teacher education programs might enhance their preparation of new teachers by offering preservice educators more pragmatic analyses of school culture, including the unique social dynamics of rural schools, and emphasize the importance of understanding community, including rural communities. Likewise, when rural school administrators expect new teachers to implement curricular reform, they should offer guidance about how to present the innovations in a way that will likely be welcomed by the community and provide support if there is resistance. Since career changers often face unique challenges in their adjustment to teaching, we recommend thoughtful assignment of mentors, an issue we discuss further in the next section.

### **Implications: Mentoring**

If school administrators and mentor teachers provide career-changing first-year teachers with clear explanations about how the school functions, who the students are, and a picture of the community, this can facilitate their smooth and full integration into the school and community. The need for such mentoring of first-year teachers may be even more critical for those beginning their careers in rural schools and communities, especially for individuals with limited experiences in these settings. The provision of a mentor for first-year teachers has been documented as a critical component of successful induction programs (e.g., Smith & Ingersoll, 2004). However, only one of our four participants, Christina, was officially assigned a mentor teacher. Tom unofficially developed useful and effective mentor-mentee relationships with colleagues. Kevin and Sandra did not experience any sort of notable mentoring support, and each faced more difficulties in their first year of

teaching. It is impossible not to speculate that their induction experience may have been eased with more formal support and connections to colleagues through mentoring.

Despite the potential benefits, mentoring is not always provided to new teachers. Even when it is provided, some mentoring programs are problematic in nature due to issues such as pre-determined end dates for support and the inevitability that random partnering of mentors and new teachers results in some unsuccessful relationships (Fry, 2007; McCann, Johannessen, & Ricca, 2005). Barriers to providing quality mentoring are compounded in rural areas, where there may just be one teacher per content area in secondary schools. A promising alternative to traditional in-person support is electronic mentoring (Brintnall, 2002), yet to date this option appears undeveloped. It would be useful to learn why some rural school districts do not provide mentoring or induction to their beginning teachers, and identify ways to overcome barriers.

**Recommendations.** We recommend teacher education programs introduce career changers to the documented benefits of mentoring and collegial relationships. As Rosenholtz (1989) explained:

Beginners who are offered help and who see requests and offers of assistance regularly exchanged between senior colleagues are socialized to accept school norms about the way in which one learns to teach. Under these conditions, novices perceive that advice is legitimately required to achieve instructional goals, that mutual assistance is often needed to attain them, and that they should avail themselves of collegial resources whenever possible. (p. 431)

Such socialization seems particularly important for career changers who may have been more autonomous in their previous positions and are thus less inclined to seek out collegial relationships, as seemed to be the case with Kevin and Sandra. Course experiences such as role-play can help preservice teachers enhance communication skills that contribute to effective mentoring relationships and learn strategies for reaching out to veteran teachers for guidance in the event that they are not assigned a formal mentor. When rural school districts are unable to offer formal mentoring programs, we recommend that administrators promote collegiality and encourage teachers to develop authentic albeit unofficial mentoring relationships.

### **Implications: Rural Communities**

The difficulties first-year teachers encounter may be further exacerbated by beginning one's career in a rural community, where well-established culture and social

practices may be understood by all but the newcomer. One way to think about the situation in which these new teachers find themselves as they begin their careers in rural schools is to consider it in the context of “reality shock”—a conflict between expectations of teaching and the reality of the work in schools (Feiman-Nemser, 2003; Veenman, 1984). Reality shock can be so overwhelming that Sabar (2004) compared beginning teachers’ socialization into their new profession to the challenges immigrants face when adjusting to life in a new country. For immigrants, the period of adjustment is often acknowledged as a crisis as these individuals may endure hardships to achieve their dreams (Sabar, 2004). Sabar (2004) explained how new teachers face similar concerns that include illusions, hope, high expectations, despair, and a sense of loss and grief that, for those who remain in the profession, are ultimately replaced by compromise, acceptance, and adjustment.

Building on Sabar’s (2004) comparison, we note that professionals who work with refugee populations seek to help these immigrants adjust to their new culture by teaching them the specific language *and* cultural knowledge and skills that will promote their successful integration into the new community. Yet traditionally induction support for new teachers has primarily focused on pedagogical skills (Shagrir, 2010), which is perhaps the equivalent of language skills for immigrants. What is additionally needed is specific preparation for the unique *cultural* components of life in a rural school and community. Two of our participants (Christina and Tom) had such experiences and backgrounds, and additionally were well-supported, either through mentoring or place-based preparation. The two other participants (Kevin and Sandra) lacked such support, and they struggled more.

**Recommendations.** School and community acculturation preparation is an ongoing process that rests to a significant degree with the hiring school district. This may be an especially critical issue for rural districts (Lowe, 2006). After initial hires of new teachers, school administrators can enhance the likely success of their new hires by actively seeking to familiarize them with explicit teaching expectations as well as the hidden social subtleties and expectations of their new schools and communities. Yet setting new teachers up for successful induction should be a shared responsibility between teacher educators and school districts. Retention and job satisfaction are optimized if new teachers have personal roots in rural communities, or at least have student-taught in a rural area (Barley, 2009).

This is likely especially crucial for new hires with non-rural backgrounds. Thus, we recommend that teacher preparation programs with substantial numbers of graduates obtaining jobs in rural areas offer coursework or workshops about rural conditions (Barley, 2009) and place consciousness (White & Reid, 2008). Workshops may be a viable option for preparation programs like our own that do not specifically focus on preparation for teaching in rural schools.

### Conclusion

In an era of increased teacher accountability, new teachers are encountering unprecedented challenges. Career-changers who choose to become teachers offer exceptional promise because of their potentially unique combinations of content expertise, experience, and professional maturity. Yet they also face unique challenges as they seek to adjust to new professional expectations and a climate of uncertainty while simultaneously developing their own professional and personal identities. During this vulnerable period, their values and beliefs about themselves are likely to be tested as they move from previous careers to preservice status in their teacher education programs and finally to professional roles in the schools (Smethen, 2007). In the well-established cultures of most schools, beginners are expected to learn and personally incorporate presently existing school cultural mores and expectations prior to assuming leadership roles (Levine, 2010).

The expectations for new teachers to patiently assimilate into potentially unfamiliar cultures, both of school and community, may be more challenging in rural schools, where the inevitable scrutiny of new teachers is more likely to extend beyond the school walls (McCracken & Miller, 1988). To date only limited research has examined the complexities of career-changing, first-year teachers’ adjustment to rural schools. Through this study we have identified salient topics to examine further as school district administrators and teacher educators strive to identify successful induction practices to promote the retention of promising teachers in rural communities. In conclusion, our findings illustrated the importance of helping teachers adjust to the culture of their new rural schools and communities, preparing these new teachers to anticipate resistance should they seek to initiate substantive changes in their schools, and providing quality mentoring to new teachers with significant non-school work experience to help them adapt their prior expertise to the expectations of the classroom and school.

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