# Action in Arkansas Teacher Education


**The Journal of the Arkansas Association of Teacher Educators**

Volume 16, Number 1
Spring 2026

## Co-Editors and Peer Reviewers

## Articles and Authors

# Educator Responsibility and Preparedness in Promoting Physical Activity in the School Setting

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## Abstract

Declining physical activity (PA) among youth is a growing concern, and schools are essential in addressing the issue. Despite PE classes, many students, particularly in secondary grades, fail to meet recommended PA levels. Classroom teachers are increasingly important in providing movement opportunities. This study examines teachers' perceptions of student PA, their influence over activity levels, the strategies they use, and the training they have received in PA and movement integration (MI). While both elementary and secondary teachers express concern, elementary educators report taking more action. Movement breaks and integrating activity into lessons were the most common strategies. The majority of public-school teachers surveyed reported no formal training in PA or MI, highlighting the need for improved professional development.

*Keywords:* physical activity (PA), movement integration, educator responsibility, educator concern, teacher training

## Introduction

Declining activity levels among children and adolescents have become a widespread concern, drawing attention from educators, policymakers, and researchers. Because kindergarten through twelfth-grade students spend many hours in school, the school setting offers a space to address this decline. Although PE is available at the elementary levels, many students are still not reaching the recommended sixty minutes of daily PA (Physical Activity Alliance, 2024; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2018). Additionally, the PE requirements often decline at the secondary level, even though secondary students are also not meeting the recommended PA time (Physical Activity Alliance, 2024). Because PE is not providing all of the movement opportunities students need, additional efforts to increase PA levels can exist in the classroom setting. However, increasing movement in the classroom relies on educators being prepared to implement movement throughout the day. These opportunities for increased PA come in the form of movement breaks and movement integration (MI). McMullen et al. (2016) note that "[a]ctivity or brain breaks seek to provide a 'break' in the day for students to move whereas movement lessons are designed to be integrated with the existing curriculum" (p. 322). For the purpose of this study, respondents were asked about any efforts they make to increase student PA levels, which include movement breaks and MI. This study surveyed Arkansas public school teachers to identify differences in elementary versus secondary teacher perceptions of student PA levels, identify differences in elementary versus secondary educators' perceived influence and steps taken to increase student PA, and understand the extent to which educators have received training related to PA and MI.

## Review of Literature

Data collected by the Physical Activity Alliance in the 2024 U.S. Report Card on Physical Activity for Children and Youth revealed that only 20% to 28% of six to seventeen-year-old children reach the recommended sixty minutes of daily PA (Physical Activity Alliance, 2024, p. 10). The CDC's 2016 State Nutrition, Physical Activity, and Obesity Profile for Arkansas reports similarly that 27.5% of adolescents had met the recommended sixty minutes of daily PA the week prior (National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, 2016). While state-mandated PE classes seem to be an obvious solution to this problem, An et al. (2021) reported that mandated PE curriculum declined with an increase in grade level. According to An et al. (2021), "only 15%, 9%, and 6% of students in elementary, middle, and high schools, respectively, are required to take PE classes on three or more days a week during the entire academic year" (p. 277-278). Given that students spend thirty-five hours of their week in the school setting, efforts beyond PE classes must exist to combat decreasing activity levels. Harvey et al. (2018) suggest that even students agree. As one Canadian student in the study said, "... I'm not saying education's bad. But you go to get out and be active. 'Cause you can't just be sitting at a desk all the time, right?" (p. 437).

While some literature seeks to understand perceptions and preparedness of preservice teachers in relation to movement, a gap exists in understanding exactly how currently licensed teachers perceive not only the lack of student PA levels, but also their ability to provide movement opportunities in their classrooms. As expressed by Bigelow and Fenesi (2023), "[u]nfortunately, only half of in-service teachers are currently implementing DPA in Ontario, leaving pre-service teachers without sufficient role models for hands-on experience" (p. 9). Because in-service teachers support preservice teacher training throughout teaching internships, a better understanding of their attitudes and confidence toward movement in the classroom is needed. The purpose of this study was to understand Arkansas public school teachers' perceptions of student PA levels, their perceived power in influencing these levels, and the training they have received related to supporting student PA.

Literature is clear that teachers must be equipped with the skills to facilitate active classrooms in the preservice stage. As Bigelow and Fenesi (2023) note, "[w]hile there are professional development opportunities for in-service teachers to update their classroom practices, with many targeting DPA implementation, the honing of these skills must also occur at the pre-service level to promote self-efficacy and create sustainable teaching habits" (p. 3). In an attempt to provide these preservice opportunities, Sevimli Celik (2014) explains that preservice teachers at a public university in northeastern United States are required to take a course called "The Child's Play as an Educative Process" (p. 78). In this study, the course was used as the setting for a twelve-week movement education module for preservice teachers. The conclusion of the study indicated that participating in the module "promoted a deeper understanding of movement education and resulted in prospective teachers appreciating the module as a worthwhile experience" and that "the module was found practical in terms providing the prospective teachers opportunities to plan, implement, and reflect on their current and future teaching practices in such a way that they can proficiently incorporate movement while teaching math, science, or language and literacy" (p. 138-139). While a majority of study participants still reported a lack of confidence in implementing the strategies learned in their future teaching, the course and movement education module are certainly a step in the right direction for preservice teachers (p. 94-95).

Williams et al. (2019) studied the effect of providing Elementary Education and Physical

Education preservice teachers with the opportunity to develop skills in overseeing recess by acting as recess assistants. Findings of this study indicated that "this type of small, practical experience, early in the education major, offered several important benefits… student teachers reported gaining confidence in the classroom, working with students, and in overseeing PA" (p. 390). Findings also indicated that teacher education should seek to better prepare educators with the skills needed to oversee PA both at recess and inside the classroom. Cale et al.'s (2016) study of PA implementation at the secondary level echoes these findings, concluding that "schools and teachers be provided with adequate and appropriate professional development opportunities to support the effective promotion of physical activity" and that "[t]raining should begin at the preservice stage and be a key component of teacher education programmes…" (p. 539).

The findings of Donnelly et al.'s (2009) three-year implementation of Physical Activity Across the Curriculum also supports the value of equipping teachers to facilitate movement in the school setting. They note that "[t]eachers who modeled PA by active participation in the PAAC lesson had greater SOFIT scores shown by their students compared to students with teachers at lower levels of modeling" (p. 339). SOFIT, System for Observing Fitness Instruction Time, is an observation method used to assess student physical activity levels (McKenzie et al., 1991). With this finding, Donnelly et al. (2009) also note that "[m]odeling by teachers may be an important mediator of PA in children" (p. 339). Educator training in this area appears to be a worthwhile investment given the influential role that teachers can play in promoting movement.

The Physical Activity Alliance also found a difference in self-reported activity levels between age groups. According to recent data collected and shared by the National Survey of Children's Health (NSCH) and the National Health And Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES), it is reported that only 26%-42% of children ages 6-11 meet physical activity recommendations. Similarly, rates for 12-17 year old students reflect a reported percentage of 15% meeting the physical activity expectations (National Survey of Children's Health, 2021-2022; National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey, 2017-2020; Physical Activity Alliance, 2024). These reports confirm the findings of Silva et al. (2022) that a decline in activity among secondary students begins with an inactivity trend that increases with age. With secondary-aged students being at such a critical stage in their activity habits, in addition to the decrease in PE courses required in the secondary setting, efforts to increase PA in the school must extend beyond the elementary level.

## Methodology

The purpose of this study was to understand Arkansas public school teachers' perceptions of student PA levels, their perceived power in influencing these levels, and the training they have received related to supporting student PA. Additionally, the study sought to compare elementary (grades kindergarten through sixth) and secondary (grades seventh through twelfth) teacher responses to determine if a significant difference existed. The following research questions were developed:

1. How do educators' perceptions of student physical activity levels differ between elementary and secondary levels?
2. How do educators' perceived power in promoting physical activity and steps taken to do so differ between elementary and secondary levels?
3. To what extent have educators been trained to promote student physical activity?

**Development of Instrument**

This instrument was developed in the fall of 2024 in the form of a Qualtrics survey. The first page of the survey included participant qualifications, researcher contact information, and informed consent. The next section of the survey asked participants to confirm that they were a current classroom teacher in Arkansas or a preservice teacher working toward licensure in the state of Arkansas. The following demographic information was collected: age range, gender, region of Arkansas teaching in, and grade levels currently being taught. Next, a variety of sliding scale and selected response questions gathered information about the participant's concern for student PA levels, perception of power they have to promote PA, steps taken to increase student PA, and training received to promote PA and MI.

**Research Design Overview**

This study collected quantitative data to address the research questions. The data collected quantified educator concern, perceived influence, steps taken, and training received in terms of averages and percentages. The data was also sorted between elementary-level and secondary-level educator responses, which allowed the quantified responses to be compared through statistical analyses to provide insight regarding differences between the two teacher groups.

**Population of the Study**

A brief description of the study, a recruitment flyer, and a link to the survey were used to recruit qualifying participants. The information was shared via email, word-of-mouth, social media, and through recruitment flyers posted at the University of Arkansas's Peabody Hall. A total of 60 valid responses were collected. Of these, 28 responses came from elementary educators, with 93% of the participants teaching in the Northwest Arkansas region. Additionally, 24 participants were secondary educators, with 79% of the participants teaching in the Northwest Arkansas region. Eight responses were collected from preservice teachers; however, these responses were not analyzed as part of the study because these preservice teachers were not asked to verify if they were currently in their teaching internship. If these preservice teachers were not part-time or full-time in a classroom setting, they would not be able to accurately answer the survey questions. For this reason, these responses were not included, yielding an overall total of 52 responses for data analysis and synthesis. Verifying these respondents as preservice teachers would have enabled a direct comparison of their confidence, attitudes, and preparedness with those of currency licensed teachers, yielding valuable insights into differences.

**Data Collection Methods**

Participants completed the survey electronically through the Qualtrics platform, which allowed for efficient data collection and organization. Upon completion of the data collection period, all responses were exported into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet to facilitate sorting and analysis. The dataset was first reviewed to ensure completeness and accuracy, with any incomplete or invalid responses removed from further analysis. Valid responses were then categorized based on the participants' professional status—specifically, whether they were preservice educators, K–6 (elementary) educators, or 7–12 (secondary) educators. This categorization enabled a more targeted examination of patterns and differences among both the elementary and secondary educator groups.

## Findings and Analysis

This study explored educators' perceptions of student PA, the extent to which they believe they can influence these activity levels, and the actions they have taken to do so. Findings show that while both elementary and secondary teachers are concerned about students' PA levels, the level of concern does not differ between the two groups. However, there is a notable difference in the number of steps each group takes to promote PA. Additionally, few educators reported receiving training from their schools, districts, or college programs regarding how to incorporate movement in the classroom.

Research Question One asked: How do educators' perceptions of student physical activity levels differ between elementary and secondary levels? Participants involved in this study answered three questions using a sliding scale of 1 - 10. The first two questions measured the extent to which educators agree that there is a lack of student PA outside of school and within the classroom setting. For these two questions, a score of one indicated strongly disagreeing with the statement, while 10 represented strong agreement. Additionally, educators were asked to indicate their level of concern for the lack of student activity in general, both inside and outside the school setting. For this question, a score of one indicated no concern while 10 indicated great concern.

These questions resulted in a numerical value for each respondent. The average scores from these questions for K-6 teachers were 7.50, 5.32, and 7.29, respectively. The average scores calculated for 7-12 educator responses were 8.46, 7.21, and 8.35, respectively. Although secondary teacher averages were higher for each of these questions, analysis using *t-tests* indicated this difference was not significant. Given that the *t-test* values were less than the critical value at 50 degrees of freedom, a difference in educator perceptions of student PA was not found to exist between the two groups, indicating that participants involved in this study do not differ statistically in their perceptions of student PA levels. The *t-values* calculated for these comparisons are reflected in Table 1.

**Table 1**

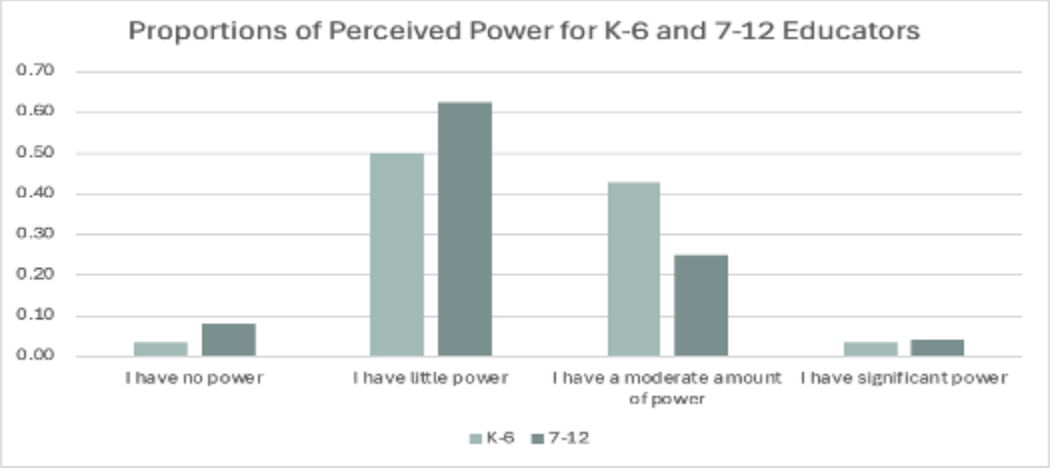
*T-values computed when comparing responses between elementary and secondary educators*

| **Question:** | ***t-Value*:** | **Critical Value:** |
|---|---|---|
| Using the following scale, please indicate the extent to which you agree that there is a lack of student physical activity OUTSIDE of the school setting (1 strongly disagree - 10 strongly agree). | .031 | 2.009 |
| Using the following scale, please indicate the extent to which you agree that there is a lack of student activity WITHIN the school setting (1 strongly disagree - 10 strongly agree). | .003 | 2.009 |
| Using the following scale, please indicate your level of concern for lack of student activity in general, both inside and outside the school setting (1 no concern - 10 great concern). | .064 | 2.009 |

Another goal of this study was to assess differences in teachers' perceived power to increase their students' PA levels as well as the degree to which educators have taken steps to increase PA levels. Research Question Two asked: How do educators' perceived power in promoting physical activity and steps taken to do so differ between elementary and secondary levels? To answer this question, participants answered two multiple-choice questions to indicate their level of perceived power and the extent of steps they have taken. Figure 1 displays the results of elementary and secondary educators responses to the question "Please indicate the extent to which you feel you have the power to increase your students' physical activity levels, educators selected from the following options: I have no power, I have little power, I have a moderate amount of power, and I have significant power."

**Figure 1**

*Comparison of proportions of perceived power between K-6 and 7-12 educators*

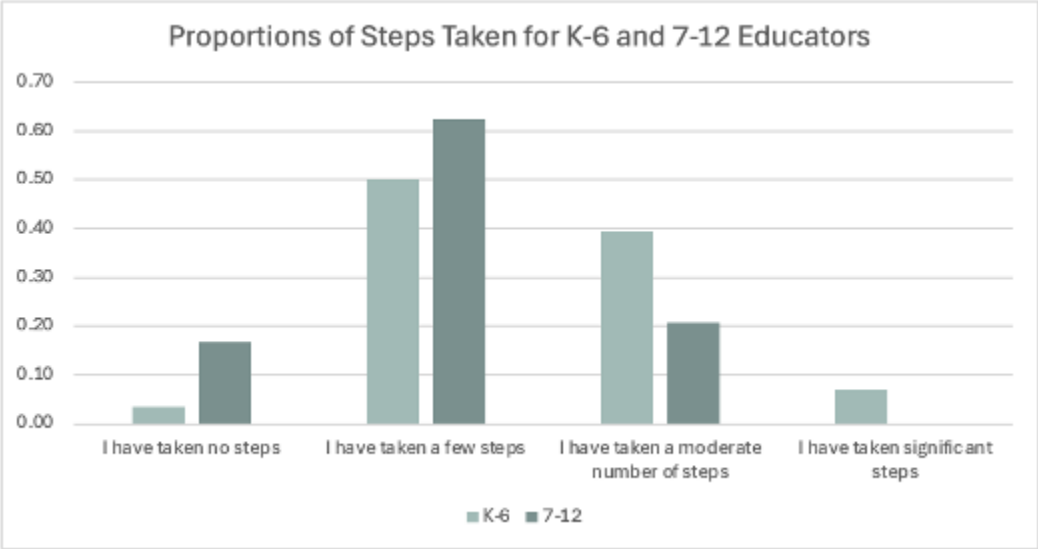



A one-way ANOVA test was conducted to examine the perceived power felt by elementary and secondary educators. Each response option was assigned a numerical value of 1-4, with "I have no power" yielding an assigned value of 1, "I have little power" assigned value 2, "I have a moderate amount of power" assigned a value of 3, and "I have significant power" assigned a value of 4. The results indicated no significant difference between the perceived power of these educator groups, $F(1) = 1.38$, $p = .245$.

Further data collected during this study help answer this research question. Participant responses to the prompt "Please indicate the extent to which you feel you have taken steps to increase your students' physical activity levels" revealed the number of steps educators in the study had taken to increase their students' PA levels. The proportion of responses for each group of teachers is displayed in Figure 2.

**Figure 2**

*Comparison of proportions of steps taken by K-6 and 7-12 educators*




A second single-factor ANOVA test was conducted to compare these results. Each response option was assigned a numerical value of 1-4, with "I have taken no steps" yielding an assigned value of 1, "I have taken a few steps" assigned value 2, "I have taken a moderate amount of steps" assigned a value of 3, and "I have taken significant steps" assigned a value of 4. The results revealed a significant difference between the steps taken by the two groups, $F(1) = 6.18$, $p = .016$. This finding suggests that secondary educators are taking significantly fewer steps than elementary educators to increase their students' PA levels. Based on the results of the analyses for these two questions, a difference was not found in the level of power elementary educators feel they have to increase student PA levels. However, a difference does exist in the self-reported steps these two groups are taking to increase their students' PA levels.

A potential factor in these differences is the structure of most elementary versus secondary school schedules. While elementary students in Arkansas often spend their school day in one classroom, students in higher grade levels switch classes more frequently. This provides secondary students with a movement opportunity not as consistently available to elementary students. This movement opportunity could contribute to fewer steps taken by secondary teachers to add movement to their classrooms. Additionally, respondents were asked to *select the way(s) you have attempted to increase student physical activity* by choosing all that applied from the options: *providing extra recess time, providing movement breaks in the classroom, providing movement breaks outside of the classroom, adding movement components to lessons,* and an *other; explain* option. The most reported methods were providing movement breaks in the classroom and adding movement components to lessons. These most popular methods were consistent between K-6 and 7-12 educators. Because educators are choosing these implementation methods regardless of the grade level(s) they teach, at a district level, training and resources related to movement breaks and MI could be beneficial investments. District investment in platforms such as ed2go grants educators access to "Move to Learn: Incorporating Movement in the Classroom" and "Taking Brain Breaks During Rigorous Classwork." Modules such as these provide educators with a toolbox of ideas to implement movement (Cengage Learning, n.d.). Additionally, district-wide professional development days provide an ideal opportunity to deliver targeted training and implementation strategies to educators across all

grade levels.

Research Question Three asked: To what extent have educators been trained to promote student physical activity? Given that the school setting is an ideal setting for increasing student PA levels, this responsibility often falls on classroom teachers. For classrooms to successfully promote movement, teachers must be equipped with the skills and resources to both implement movement and encourage active lifestyles among students. Therefore, this study sought to better understand the training that Arkansas public school teachers have received in this field.

Over 69% of participants involved in this study indicated they had not received training received from their school or district when answering the prompt, "Did you ever receive training from your school or district to promote physical activity and/or movement integration?" To test for a difference among school and/or district training received by elementary and secondary educators, an ANOVA test was conducted. Response options *Yes, from my school and district,* Y*es, from my district, Yes, from my school,* and *No* were assigned values of 4, 3, 2, and 1, respectively. The results revealed no difference between the two groups, $F(1) = .02$, $p = .888$.

Another survey question asked, "As part of your college degree program, did you receive training to promote physical activity and/or movement integration? If you select yes, please provide a brief description of the training you received." Of the participants in this study, 71% indicated they had not received PA training at the college level. Williams et al. (2019) note that preparing educators in this area before entering the field is key. As only 29% of teachers who completed the survey received college-level training, this suggests a gap in adequate teacher training. An ANOVA test conducted for this question assigned *Yes* responses a value of 2 and *No* responses a value of 1. The results revealed no difference between college training that elementary and secondary educators received, $F(1) = 1.38$, $p = .246$. While the eight responses from preservice teachers were not included in the analyses, only two of their responses indicated that they had received training to incorporate movement thus far in their undergraduate program. Analysis of various teacher preparation programs and institutions in Arkansas reveal a lack of explicit training related to PA in a learning setting, providing further insight on the continued lack of preservice teacher training.

## Limitations

A limitation of this study was the population size, as 52 complete responses were received to analyze. Additionally, 87% of respondents indicated they teach in Northwest Arkansas. This is likely since the study was conducted in Northwest Arkansas, meaning these teachers were more likely to learn about the study through word-of-mouth recruitment efforts. As the demographics and income level in Northwest Arkansas vary in comparison to other regions in the state, participants involved in this study may have access to more resources, funding, and training, which could impact the perceptions and attitudes measured in this study. Without data collected from educators in other regions, the results of participants involved in this study cannot be accurately compared to those from educators in other regions of the state. Additionally, the self-reporting nature of this study is a potential limitation. Respondents were asked to certify that they were licensed educators in a public school in Arkansas. Because this survey did not require proof of licensure and was available to the general public, this also introduced the potential for respondents to complete the survey without meeting the criteria.

## Summary of Findings

Regarding the first research question, PA perceptions of participants involved in this

study do not significantly differ between elementary and secondary educators. Although no difference was found between these teacher groups, the overall average of concern for lack of student PA in general was 7.76. A score of 10 on the sliding scale used on this assessment indicated a "great concern" therefore the mean of 7.76 indicates significant concern for participants involved in this study. Concerning research question two, the perceived power to increase student PA levels did not differ between educator groups; yet there was a significant difference in the number of steps taken when elementary and secondary teacher responses were compared. Kindergarten through sixth-grade (elementary) teachers reported taking more steps than seventh through twelfth-grade (secondary) teachers. Findings of this study echo the findings of the Physical Activity Alliance's report that the percentage of older children meeting the recommended PA guidelines is lower than the percentage of younger children.

Finally, in response to research question three, a majority of educators who participated in this survey report being inadequately trained to promote PA. This is reflected in the data, which revealed that 69% of the participants reported that they have not received related training from their school or district, and 71% did not receive related training as part of their college teacher preparation program. When considered alongside teachers' levels of concern for lack of student PA, a gap between educator awareness of the issue and educator coaching to combat the problem was found.

## Recommendations for Future Research

One of the most significant findings of this study was the glaring discrepancy between the number of participants who reported having received training regarding PA and those who had not. Of the participants involved in this study, 69% of respondents indicated they had not received PA training from their school or district, and 71% reported they did not receive training in their college degree program. Further study of effective teacher training would benefit the field. Teacher interviews conducted in Cale et al.'s, (2016) study on secondary educator preparation in the area of PA implementation reveal that preservice training was the only preparation some of the teachers in this population received. Effective incorporation of movement in the classroom must begin with preparing educators to implement movement; therefore, additional training for preservice and novice teachers would better equip these new educators to incorporate movement in their classrooms from the beginning. Teacher preparation programs that adopt strategies designed to promote PA early in their teaching careers could potentially raise the power educators feel they have to increase their students' PA levels, in addition to the steps educators take toward this increase. Additional research regarding effective teacher preparation and the implementation of such preparation into teaching programs will support a population of new educators who are better prepared to combat declining PA levels.

## Conclusion

Overall, research supports the integral role that educators can play in creating movement opportunities for students. While differences were not found between elementary and secondary educators' levels of concern for student PA levels, reports like the U.S. Report Card on Physical Activity for Children and Youth confirm educators' concern for lack of PA regardless of grade level (Physical Activity Alliance, 2024). Results from this study revealed that elementary educators reported taking more steps to increase their students' PA levels when compared to their secondary educator counterparts. Additionally, a majority of Arkansas public school teachers who participated in the survey reported never receiving training from their teacher preparation

program, school, or district. Due to this, increased training at the college, school, and district levels could better equip educators to facilitate active classrooms and increase the number of students who meet the recommended PA guidelines.

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# From the Stage to the Classroom: How Improv Skills Support Teacher Development

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## Abstract

Teaching requires more than carefully designed lesson plans. This article examines how theater improvisation can be used in educator preparation to help teacher candidates respond to classroom situations and make instructional decisions in real time. Pedagogical improvisation refers to this professional capacity. While improvisation is often viewed as spontaneous or unstructured, research shows it is a teaching skill grounded in preparation, knowledge, and reflection. Drawing on research from educator preparation and applied improvisation, this article presents a framework for embedding improvisational practices across coursework, field experiences, and clinical practice. Practical strategies demonstrate how educator preparation programs can use improvisational activities to support more responsive teaching.

*Keywords:* pedagogical improvisation, educator preparation, responsive teaching

## Introduction

Teaching has never been a static profession. Classrooms shift quickly, and students bring a mix of needs, strengths, and questions. Teachers must continually interpret what is happening and decide how to respond. Pedagogical improvisation captures this idea. It's the ability to make informed decisions while teaching and adjusting to what happens in real-time (Ben-Horin, 2016). Planning still matters, but effective teaching requires more than following a lesson script. It calls for educators who can draw on their knowledge and turn unexpected moments into opportunities for learning.

Despite its importance, improvisation is often misunderstood in educational contexts. It may imply spontaneity without preparation or a lack of structure, but research in educator preparation suggests the opposite. Improvisation represents a disciplined professional skill grounded in knowledge, preparation, and judgment, all skills required of effective educators (Holdhus et al., 2016). Teacher candidates must learn not only how to plan lessons but also how to respond flexibly to student thinking in real time. However, educator preparation programs have traditionally focused on building strong content knowledge and planning skills. The real challenge is helping candidates shift from knowing about a topic to knowing when and how to use it during instruction (Maheux & Lajoie, 2010).

One promising approach is integrating theater-based improvisation into educator preparation. Improvisational theater exercises help candidates listen closely, respond in the moment, and take creative risks. Research shows that drama-based learning experiences can strengthen teacher candidates' creativity, communication, and confidence in classroom settings (Toivanen et al., 2011). When they bring these skills into classrooms, students experience more engaging learning environments (Munk et al., 2024).

## Literature Review

### Improvisation as Teaching Practice

Improvisation has long been recognized as a central element of professional teaching. Classrooms rarely unfold exactly as planned, and teachers must continually interpret student

responses and adapt accordingly. This quick decision-making practice is increasingly described as pedagogical improvisation (Ben-Horin, 2016).

Holdhus et al. (2016) argue that improvisation is not merely a reaction to classroom disruption but a fundamental dimension of teaching practice. They describe improvisation as a conversational process where teachers and students co-construct learning experiences through interaction rather than simple adherence to predetermined scripts. Similarly, Maheux and Lajoie (2010) note that teaching requires a form of practical knowledge that emerges through action. Teachers are constantly required to make decisions in rapidly changing environments where outcomes cannot always be predicted. Improvisation allows teachers to connect their academic knowledge with immediate classroom realities.

The notion that improvisation is a professional competency that can be developed is further supported by the work of Aadland, Espeland, and Arnesen (2017), who propose a classification that distinguishes between several forms of pedagogical improvisation. At the most basic level, teachers may make reactive adjustments to unexpected classroom situations. More advanced forms involve adaptive improvisation, where educators intentionally adjust instruction based on student understanding. At the highest level, generative improvisation occurs when both teachers and students work together to create new learning experiences. This hierarchy highlights an important implication for educator preparation. Improvisation is not an innate trait only possessed by some teachers and not others. Instead, it is a professional skill that can be developed through coordinated experiences, practice, and reflection.

**Improvisation and Educator Preparation**

Theater improvisation (improv) provides a useful framework for cultivating these essential teaching skills. Improv training emphasizes active listening, collaboration, and responsiveness, all skills that closely align with effective teaching practices.

Toivanen, Komulainen, and Ruismaki (2011) conducted a study examining the role of drama and improvisation in teacher education. Their findings indicated that participation in improvisational activities increased teacher candidate creativity, communication skills, and willingness to take instructional risks. Participants also reported greater confidence in their ability to lead classroom interactions and respond to student ideas.

Similarly, Barker (2019) investigated how improvisational theater exercises influenced teacher candidates' facilitation of classroom discussions. The results indicated that candidates who engaged in improv activities developed stronger pedagogical presence including responsiveness and attunement to classroom interactions. Participants demonstrated increased ability to guide discussions while building on student responses.

Improv operates through principles that mirror effective teaching practices. Both require capturing attention, communicating with voice and body, and being ready to depart from the script when needed (Seppanen & Toivanen, 2023). One of the most widely recognized improv principles is "yes, and," which encourages participants to accept a partner's contributions and extend the idea collaboratively. When applied to classrooms, this principle encourages educators to treat student responses as start points for exploration rather than errors to be corrected.

Improvisation techniques can also help educators develop more collaborative learning environments (Rossing & Hoffman-Longtin, 2016). By practicing improvisational dialogue, teachers learn to listen closely to student ideas and incorporate them into instruction. This transforms classroom discussions from a teacher-centered exchange into a shared process of learning.

### Responsiveness and Professional Judgment

Improvisational practices also strengthen broader dimensions of educator development. Studies suggest that theater-based learning can enhance creativity and pedagogical flexibility among teacher candidates (Toivanen et al., 2011). These qualities are increasingly essential for modern classroom environments.

In addition to creativity and responsiveness, improv stimulates professional judgment. Teachers often face moments where decisions must be made immediately. Improv training provides opportunities to rehearse these decisions in supportive environments with structured techniques.

Taken together, the literature suggests that improvisation serves as both a pedagogical practice and a developmental tool for teacher candidates. When integrated thoughtfully into educator preparation, improvisation can strengthen candidates' ability to respond to classroom complexity while maintaining instructional purpose.

## A Developmental Framework for Improvisation in Educator Preparation

Improvisational competence develops gradually through intentional practice and reflection. Building on previous research (Ben-Horin, 2016; Aadland et al., 2017), a four-stage developmental framework can guide the integration of improvisation within educator preparation programs (EPPs).

### Stage 1: Preparation

The first stage focuses on establishing foundational knowledge and psychological safety. Teacher candidates must possess sufficient content knowledge and pedagogical strategies to improvise effectively. Improvisation does not replace preparation, but builds upon it. Introducing improvisation early also helps candidates understand that improvising is part of skilled teaching, not a lack of planning (Seppanen & Toivanen, 2023).

Educator preparation courses can introduce candidates to core principles of improvisation such as effective listening, collaborative dialogue, and creative risk-taking. Short activities such as storytelling prompts or mathematical reasoning games allow candidates to experience how improvisation connects to instructional practice.

Equally as important is establishing a supportive culture in which experimentation is encouraged. Early practice can include theater games to build spontaneity and trust (Hackbert, 2010). When candidates view mistakes as opportunities for learning, they become more willing to engage in creative instructional approaches. This step normalizes creative risk-taking and sets the tone for a fail-forward mindset, a strategy they can one day model for their own students.

### Stage 2: Rehearsal

The rehearsal stage provides structured opportunities to practice improvisational thinking in low-stakes environments. EPPs can incorporate theater games, role-playing scenarios, and teaching simulations into coursework.

For example, candidates might participate in exercises where they must extend a partner's ideas using the "yes, and" principle. Other activities might involve responding to hypothetical student misconceptions or unexpected classroom questions. These exercises allow candidates to test strategies, make mistakes, and receive feedback without the pressure of real classroom consequences (Maheux & Lajoie, 2010). Over time, they develop greater comfort with uncertainty and more flexible approaches to instruction.

**Stage 3: Experience**

The experience stage occurs during clinical practice, when teacher candidates apply improv skills in real classrooms. Ben-Horin (2016) refers to this process as authentic pedagogical improvisation. During student teaching or residency experiences, candidates encounter the full complexity of classroom environments. Students ask unexpected questions, lessons unfold differently than planned, and instructional adjustments become necessary.

Biasutti's (2015) work on improvisational cognition identifies five dimensions that characterize effective improvisational performance, including anticipating student reactions, drawing on a flexible set of strategies, communicating with emotion, listening for feedback, and maintaining instructional flow. Mentor teachers and university supervisors can support teacher candidates by encouraging reflection on these moments and discussing how instructional decisions influenced student learning.

**Stage 4: Reflection**

Reflection transforms experience into professional knowledge. Intentional reflection helps candidates recognize when and why they improvised and what resulted from those decisions (Ben-Horin, 2016). Reflection activities may include journaling, video analysis, or group discussions.

Reflective conversations help candidates recognize improvisation as a deliberate aspect of teaching rather than an accidental occurrence. The key is helping candidates name the choices they made and connect them to future practice.

## Strategies for Integrating Improv Across Educator Preparation

Educator preparation programs (EPPs) interested in integrating improvisation do not need to redesign entire courses or degree programs. Small, consistent practices can gradually strengthen improvisational thinking.

**"Yes, And" Classroom Discussion Practice**

Candidates practice extending student responses rather than correcting them immediately using the "yes, and" principle. For example, candidates may be given a potential student response such as "I think the character left because he was afraid." They then practice responding using the "yes, and" principle, extending the student's idea with prompts such as, "Yes, and what part of the story makes you think that?". This exercise develops discussion facilitation skills and encourages deeper exploration of student ideas (Barker, 2019).

**Improvised Lesson Interruptions**

During micro-teaching sessions, instructors can introduce unexpected events such as technology failures, off-topic questions, or student misconceptions. Candidates must adjust instruction in real time. These activities simulate authentic classroom unpredictability and strengthen adaptive teaching skills.

**Presence and Communication Exercises**

Borrowed from theater training, these exercises focus on vocal tone, body language, and pacing. Candidates can practice delivering short explanations while maintaining clear communication and classroom presence (Toivanen et al., 2011).

**Improvisation Reflection Protocol**

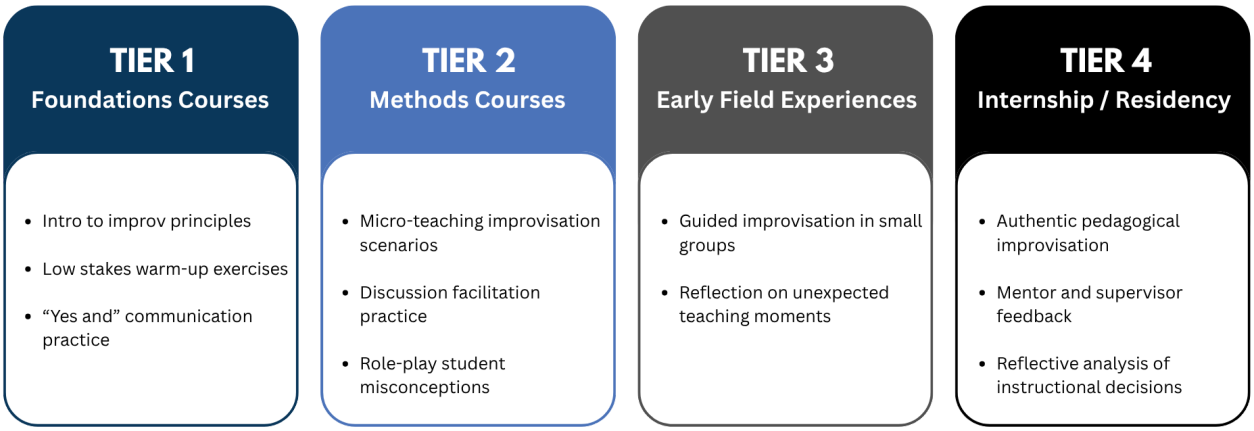
After teaching, candidates can complete a short reflection protocol addressing:

1. What unexpected moment occurred?
2. What instructional decision did you make?
3. What alternative responses were possible?

This process helps candidates recognize improvisation as a professional decision-making process (Ben-Horin, 2016). University supervisors can also support reflection by asking targeted questions such as "What made you decide to shift directions at that moment?". The progression of these stages across educator preparation is illustrated in Figure 1.

**Figure 1**

*Progression for Integrating Improvisation in Educator Preparation*




## Impact of Improvisation in the Classroom

Modern classrooms call for teachers who can think critically, respond confidently, and build strong relationships with students. Improvisation supports these needs and strengthens learning for both teachers and students.

Teachers who improvise often create more engaging, student-centered classrooms. Students become active contributors rather than passive recipients of information. When teachers build on student ideas during instruction, learners experience greater ownership of their learning (Ben-Horin, 2016). Improvisation also encourages deeper exploration of academic content. Rather than focusing solely on predetermined answers, students must engage in collective inquiry that prompts stronger conceptual understanding (Munk et al., 2024). Improv-oriented classrooms also encourage risk-taking and turn mistakes into learning opportunities. When errors aren't punished, students feel safe experimenting (Skinner et al., 2022). Over time, this builds confidence and curiosity.

Improvisation benefits not only students but also the teachers who facilitate these learning environments. For teacher candidates, improvisation strengthens confidence and instructional adaptability. Candidates learn to respond to real classroom dynamics instead of relying solely on plans. Research shows that candidates with improv training report lower teaching anxiety and greater confidence (Seppanen & Toivanen, 2023; Simpson et al., 2022). They often find their early years of teaching more enjoyable and manageable. Improvisation also supports inquiry-based instruction. Teachers who embrace it ask more open questions and design lessons that include student input. This leads to a more collaborative learning environment where

teachers and students construct knowledge together (Graue et al., 2015).

For EPPs, improv can strengthen program culture. Many accreditation standards increasingly value differentiated, interactive teaching and improv provides concrete activities for meeting those standards. It also encourages faculty collaboration, especially between education and theater departments. Early results from programs that have integrated improv activities report stronger learning communities and approach teaching with greater curiosity (Seppanen & Toivanen, 2023).

Finally, improv training aligns with broader educational goals like social-emotional learning and 21st-century skills. It naturally integrates empathy, listening, and adaptability, skills that teachers and students need both in and out of school. Even beyond the classroom, communities benefit. Teachers who improvise turn school into a shared space of creativity, preparing students for a rapidly changing world.

## Challenges and Tensions

While the benefits of improv are clear, major challenges remain. Today's schools often emphasize accountability and predictability, which can make improvisation seem risky. Some veteran teachers may even see improvising as unprofessional or unprepared. Holdhus et al. (2016) note that improvisational teaching emphasizes dialogue and responsiveness, which may challenge traditional concepts of classroom management that prioritize predictability and teacher control. EPPs therefore play a crucial role in reframing improvisation as disciplined spontaneity rather than unstructured instruction. When candidates understand improvisation as a complement to planning, they learn to balance preparation with adaptability. With structured practice, candidates learn that adapting in the moment strengthens instruction rather than undermining it (Seppanen & Toivanen, 2023).

## Conclusion

Improvisation represents a central dimension of effective teaching. Classrooms are dynamic environments where instruction evolves through interaction between teachers and students. Educators must therefore develop the ability to interpret classroom events and respond thoughtfully in real time. Research suggests that theater improvisation provides a powerful framework for cultivating this professional competence. Improv exercises strengthen communication, creativity, and pedagogical presence while helping teacher candidates practice adaptive instructional decision-making.

By integrating improvisational practices into coursework, field experiences, and reflection activities, educator preparation programs can help candidates develop the agility required for modern classrooms. When teachers learn to combine careful planning with responsive teaching, they transform unexpected moments into opportunities for deeper learning.

Improvisation does not replace structure in teaching. Instead, it enables teachers to use structure flexibly and responsively. Viewed this way, pedagogical improvisation reflects not a departure from professional practice but one of its most essential forms.

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# Teacher Perspectives on Effective Interventions and Therapies for Students with Diverse Support Needs

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This mixed-methods phenomenological study examined teachers' experiences supporting students with diverse learning and support needs in Arkansas public schools. Sixty-four K–12 teachers across seven districts reported coordinating academic instruction with therapeutic interventions. From the findings, four key themes emerged: (1) targeted/individualized instruction maximizes progress, (2) commitment and consistency are essential, (3) collaboration among staff is critical, and (4) coordination of multiple therapies is constrained by time and scheduling conflicts. Teachers emphasized that interventions are most effective when consistently reinforced and aligned across professionals. Structural factors constrained implementation. The results indicate a need for increased support staffing, improved scheduling for teachers and therapists, and an approach that balances interventions while preserving core instruction.

*Keywords:* diverse learners, Arkansas public schools, inclusive education, mixed-methods research

## Introduction

Classroom teachers act as the central coordinators of academic instruction while simultaneously implementing accommodations, interventions, and therapeutic strategies within inclusive classroom settings. This layered system of support requires ongoing communication, shared decision-making, and alignment between classroom practice and specialized services to ensure students' academic and social-emotional growth, which has a significant impact on the daily lives of students.

The number of students requiring therapeutic and specialized interventions through Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), Section 504 plans (504s), and Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) continues to grow. As inclusive policies expand, teachers take on greater responsibility for integrating these interventions into daily instruction, making professional judgments about which strategies most effectively support student learning and well-being. Many students now receive multiple concurrent interventions, which suggests the increasing complexity of classroom demands.

Despite the growing complexity of these responsibilities, relatively few studies have examined teachers' firsthand experiences managing multiple, overlapping interventions while navigating the practical, structural, and collaborative challenges of inclusive classrooms. Much of the existing literature emphasizes intervention outcomes and delivery models, while comparatively less attention has been given to teachers' experiences coordinating and sustaining multiple supports within everyday classroom practice.

This study adopts a bottom-up perspective, positioning teachers as knowledge-holders whose lived experiences provide critical insight into how intervention systems operate in real classrooms. This research specifically examines teachers' perspectives on collaboration with interventionists and specialists, the challenges of scheduling and staffing, and strategies that

support the consistent implementation of individualized interventions.

## Teachers as Central Actors in Inclusive Education

Inclusive education is widely recognized as a human rights imperative, affirmed internationally by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), which calls for full participation and access to quality education for all learners (Forlin & Chambers, 2011). In the United States, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA; U.S. Department of Education, 2004) establishes a Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) mandate, reinforcing that students with disabilities should be educated alongside their peers to the maximum extent appropriate. However, substantial gaps persist between policy intent and classroom realities, often linked to limited resources, inconsistent professional development, and systemic barriers to collaboration (De Boer & Kuijper, 2020; Kauffman & Hornby, 2020). Research indicates that the effectiveness of inclusion depends not only on the presence of supports but also on how they are integrated into daily instruction. When implemented effectively, supports can enhance students' academic access, engagement with grade-level content, and social-emotional development through peer interactions and a sense of belonging (Kart & Kart, 2021; Derzhavina et al., 2021). Access to these supports is often uneven, as teachers report insufficient preparation for differentiation and disability-specific strategies, professional development that is inconsistent, and limited time for collaboration with specialists (Crispel & Kasperski, 2019; Al Jaffal, 2022; Sandberg et al., 2009).

Cooperative practices, such as co-teaching, shared planning, and integration of multiple therapies, have been associated with improved outcomes for both teachers and students, yet systemic and structural constraints frequently limit their consistent implementation (Scruggs et al., 2007; Friend et al., 2010; Murawski & Lochner, 2017). Partnerships between educators and specialists are critical for implementing inclusive practice, but collaboration is shaped by relational, organizational, and systemic factors (Jeremy et al., 2025; Ianni et al., 2025; Squires et al., 2024). Teachers must often navigate the coordination of interventions alongside core instructional responsibilities, such as the implementation of Tier 1 instruction, highlighting the complex and relational work required for inclusive classrooms to be successful.

Beneficial inclusive design requires more than availability of tools; it depends on their deliberate alignment with instruction and their infusion into classroom routines. Laabidi et al. (2014) emphasize that supports function best when integrated into daily practice. Effective supports involve assistive technologies, structured interventions, and differentiated strategies to promote accessibility, engagement, and improved learning outcomes (Leifler et al., 2021; Tansley et al., 2021; Pawar & Khose, 2024). Teacher advocacy, structured collaboration, and whole-school frameworks have been identified as key factors for sustaining inclusion, providing the conditions that enable multiple supports to function cohesively within classrooms (Bradley‑Levine, 2021; Kauffman & Hornby, 2020).

Taken together, the literature suggests that inclusive success is conditional: benefits emerge when staffing, teacher expertise, collaboration, and school culture are robust, as challenges arise when these conditions are insufficient. While many studies address programmatic success and specialist perspectives, the present study examines the lived experiences of teachers coordinating multiple therapies and supports for students with diverse learning and developmental needs. By documenting how teachers integrate these interventions into daily classroom practices within Arkansas schools, this study aims to provide insight into the practical realities of inclusive education and inform policy, professional development, and

collaborative practices.

## Methodology

This mixed-methods phenomenological study explored teacher perspectives on supporting students with diverse learning and support needs across seven public school-districts in Arkansas, including rural, suburban, and urban contexts. While pure phenomenology is qualitative, a mixed-methods approach was selected to study relevant quantitative information. Qualitative data was thematically analyzed by two independent coders and quantitative data provided context for emerging themes. The study sought to examine the lived experiences of teachers, particularly regarding collaboration, coordination of multiple interventions, and the influence of district and school-level policies on classroom practices. Teachers were positioned as knowledge-holders, providing valuable insight into how supports are implemented and experienced in real-world classroom settings, as well as the challenges that arise due to inconsistencies.

Participants included 64 licensed classroom teachers representing grades K–12 across multiple content areas. Teaching experience ranged from first-year educators to those with over 50 years in the classroom. Most participants reported supporting students with academic, behavioral, or social-emotional needs daily ($n$ = 48, 83%).

Teachers reported exposure to a range of interventions and support services. The most frequently observed supports included academic intervention, speech or language therapy, behavioral or counseling services, enrichment or gifted and talented programming, and specialized language instruction for ESOL students. Notably, these were also the supports teachers most often identified as effective, suggesting that the interventions most commonly integrated into classroom practice were also those perceived as most beneficial for student learning.

Data was collected via a custom online survey created in Google Forms to leverage teachers' familiarity with the platform. The survey included eligibility screening, four demographic items, multiple-choice questions regarding interventions utilized and their perceived effectiveness, and four open-ended questions probing teachers' instructional strategies, collaboration with specialists, perceived challenges, and successes in implementing interventions. Two Likert-scale sections (14 statements each) measured teachers' perceptions of the integration and effectiveness of supports within their classrooms.

The survey was distributed over two months following Institutional Review Board approval from the University of Arkansas–Fort Smith. District administrators emailed the survey to eligible teachers. This safeguard helped ensure that only teachers actively serving students participated, adding credibility to the representativeness of the sample and diversified the experiences of participants. Participation was voluntary and anonymous, and implied consent was obtained from teachers before their participation.

Qualitative data from open-ended responses were analyzed thematically. Two independent coders identified recurring patterns related to instructional strategies, collaboration, barriers, and perceived impact of interventions. Discrepancies were reconciled through discussion to finalize themes. Quantitative data from multiple-choice and Likert-scale items were summarized descriptively and used to support and contextualize the emerging qualitative themes. Subgroup analyses, including comparisons by grade level taught and frequency of intervention use, were considered to identify variations in teacher experiences and perceptions across instructional contexts.

The mixed-methods design allowed for triangulation, integrating quantitative trends with qualitative insights to produce a comprehensive understanding of how teachers experience and evaluate interventions and collaborative practices. The combination of numeric summaries and detailed narrative accounts provides a nuanced view of both measurable patterns and contextualized experiences, highlighting the intersection of policy, practice, and classroom realities.

To assess whether most participants reported a particular response, one-sample proportion z-tests compared the observed proportions to a benchmark value of 0.50. These tests confirmed that the proportion of teachers reporting a particular experience or perception was significantly greater than half of the participants. For these tests, the null hypothesis stated that the population proportion was equal to 0.50, representing a simple majority benchmark, while the alternative hypothesis tested whether the proportion was greater than 0.50.

In addition, two-sample proportion z-tests were used to compare proportions between groups when examining differences across categories. These tests evaluated whether the differences across two independent sample proportions were statistically significant. For these comparisons, the null hypothesis stated that the population proportions were equal, while the alternative hypothesis tested whether the proportions differed between groups. For each inferential test, the z statistic (z), and the corresponding p-value (p) were reported.

Prior to conducting these tests, the standard assumptions for proportion z-tests were verified. These assumptions include independence of observations and sufficiently large sample sizes to justify the normal approximation to the binomial distribution. For all inferential tests, a significance level of $\alpha = 0.05$ was used to determine statistical significance.

This study adhered to ethical guidelines for human subjects' research. IRB approval was obtained from the University of Arkansas–Fort Smith. Participation was voluntary, anonymous, and posed minimal risk. No identifying information was collected or revealed in at any point, and all survey data were stored securely on password-protected systems accessible only to the research team.

## Findings

Analysis of survey responses from 64 K–12 teachers across seven Arkansas public school-districts revealed four interrelated themes describing both the conditions that support effective interventions and the structural constraints that limit their implementation. Teachers overwhelmingly identified targeted, individualized instruction as among the most effective approaches for addressing diverse student needs. Participants emphasized that these interventions are most successful when implemented consistently and reinforced within the classroom by teachers. Sustaining this level of consistency depends heavily on ongoing collaboration among classroom teachers, specialists, and interventionists who coordinate strategies and monitor student progress. Despite widespread agreement regarding the effectiveness of these practices, teachers reported that time constraints, scheduling conflicts, and limited staffing frequently disrupt coordinated intervention delivery. Together, these themes illustrate the complex interplay between instructional practices, professional collaboration, and structural limitations that shape how therapies and interventions are implemented in K–12 settings.

### Theme 1: Targeted, Individualized Instruction Maximizes Student Progress

Across responses, teachers consistently identified targeted, individualized instruction as the most, or one of the most effective approaches for supporting students with diverse academic,

linguistic, and behavioral needs. Small-group and one-to-one instructional arrangements were frequently described as allowing educators and specialists to tailor instruction, reduce distractions, and provide immediate feedback aligned with students' specific learning profiles. As one teacher explained, "Interventions work best in small group settings away from distractions." Similarly, another participant noted, "Usually one-on-one interventions with pull out times have been the most effective, across disciplines."

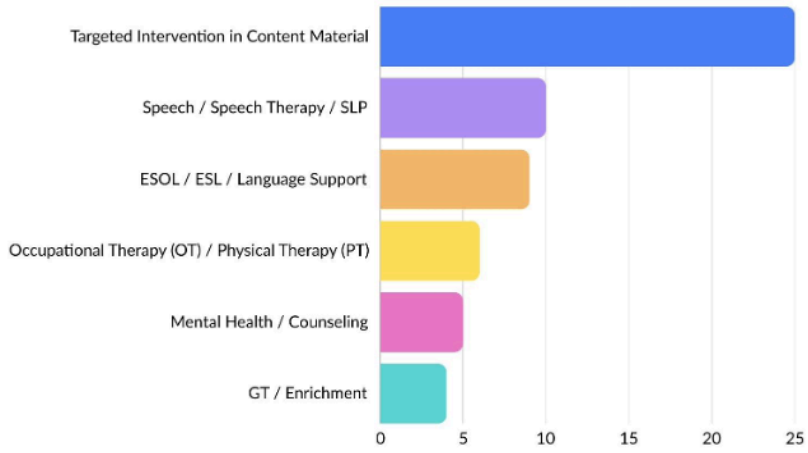
Other survey responses confirm this notion, indicating that individualized interventions are widely available and implemented in participating schools. Approximately 61 teachers reported that individualized or small-group interventions were available in their schools, and 59 reported observing these supports implemented in practice. Among respondents who evaluated effectiveness, 47 of 49 teachers (96%) rated individualized interventions as at least moderately effective, with many describing them as very or highly effective. A one-sample proportion z-test indicated that this proportion was significantly greater than 50% ($z = 6.43$, $p < 0.00001$). These findings suggest strong agreement among teachers that individualized approaches are a central component of effective intervention systems. With these approaches, students can receive the amount of needed attention, instructional support, and social support they need to succeed.

When asked which therapies or interventions were most effective, three forms of support were mentioned most frequently: targeted intervention in content material, speech-language therapy, and ESOL/ESL language supports. Teachers emphasized that individualized instruction enables educators to address specific academic skill gaps, particularly in reading and language development. Several participants highlighted the impact of speech-language services, noting that these supports not only assist with communication but also reinforce foundational literacy skills. One teacher identified speech as the most useful intervention: "Speech so students can effectively communicate… Also helps with phonics and reading instruction." When teachers were asked to rate the effectiveness of speech-language therapy 36/60 (60%) rated the therapy as "effective" or "highly effective."

ESOL services were similarly described as essential for supporting students navigating new linguistic and cultural environments. As one respondent observed, "Many students are in culture shock and struggle to learn content because they are so overwhelmed with everyday activities. The ESOL teacher is essential." In addition to language and literacy supports, teachers frequently referenced academic interventions such as RTI frameworks, specialized small-group instruction, behavioral or mental health counseling and occupational and physical therapy services. Figure 1 shows teacher responses to the open-ended question about which supports they find most effective for student success.

**Figure 1**

*Teacher-Reported Most Effective Supports for Student Success*



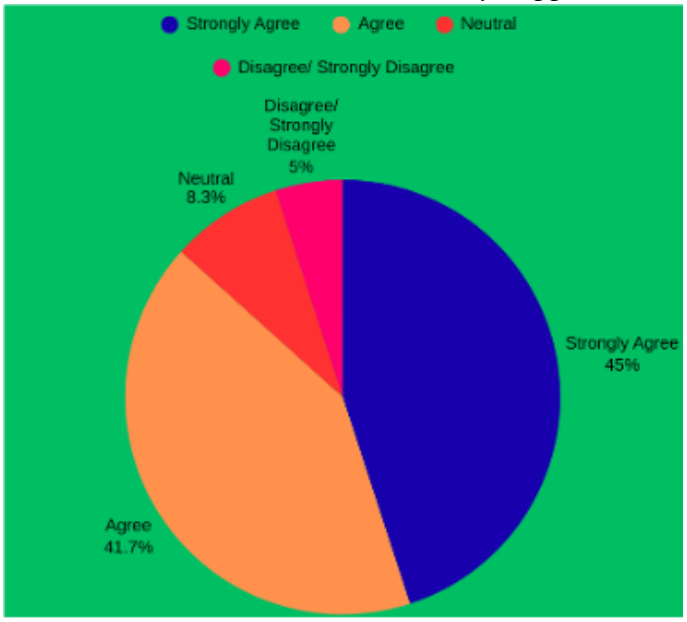

Several respondents emphasized that the most effective supports combine multiple approaches rather than relying on a single intervention. One experienced teacher noted that successful interventions often integrate "skill-building, structure, and strong adult relationships rather than relying on a single intervention." Given the perspectives of teachers and reflective data on this specific category, teachers clearly state that targeted, individualized instruction has value. Taken together, these findings highlight a consistent pattern: teachers overwhelmingly view targeted, individualized instruction as highly effective for supporting students with diverse learning and support needs, particularly when combined with specialized services such as speech-language therapy and ESOL support. The ability to provide these interventions consistently is shaped by staffing levels, scheduling structures, and available resources, underscoring the importance of organizational supports that allow individualized interventions to be implemented with integrity.

**Theme 2: Commitment and Consistency are Essential for Intervention Success**

Teachers emphasized that the effectiveness of interventions relies heavily on regular implementation, classroom reinforcement, and ongoing monitoring. When teachers were asked to respond to the statement, "Teachers play an essential role in reinforcing therapeutic strategies", 25/60 (41.7%) "agreed" and 27/60 (45%) "strongly agreed". Overall, combining the responses of teachers who either "agreed" or "strongly agreed," 52/60 (86.7%) responded to one of the two options. Figure 2 demonstrates the importance of reinforcing supports provided to students with diverse learning needs.

**Figure 2**

*Extent to Which Teachers Believe They Support Therapeutic Interventions*




When supports were fragmented or irregular, their impact diminished. Quantitative analyses revealed a clear pattern: among teachers who worked daily with students receiving special-needs support (n = 48), 83% agreed or strongly agreed that their role is integral to intervention success. A one-sample proportion z-test indicated that this proportion was significantly greater than 50% ($z = 4.62$, $p < 0.001$). Those working with this population several times per week were slightly less likely to agree (5/7; 71%), and teachers who worked with such students rarely or a few times per year expressed minimal agreement (2/4; 50%). This pattern underscores the relationship between frequency of teacher involvement and recognition of their critical role in intervention outcomes.

Teacher responses highlighted several practices that enhanced the effectiveness of interventions. Consistent collaboration with specialists and therapists was frequently referenced in the majority. As one participant noted, “Consistent communication with therapists and matching expectations from therapy in the classroom” was essential. Others described teamwork and flexibility as critical components, highlighting the need for “teamwork, give and take because all the professionals bring great ideas to the table,” and for “the therapist or teacher… [to be] excited about it, willing to try new things, and not stuck in the past.” Several teachers linked effectiveness to classroom structures, citing smaller class sizes and routines: “Small classroom sizes have made the biggest difference so more attention can be used on the individual basis. Routine in class also helps as it establishes times for 1 on 1 help if needed.” Student engagement and buy-in were also highlighted as key factors in intervention success.

Parental involvement plays a significant role in the consistency of implemented therapies, as parents can help their children at home with some of the skills they may be working on in therapy at school. As one special education teacher stated:

> “Through this work, I have seen the benefits of a wide range of therapies. The earlier interventions begin, the more successful students tend to be. It is also important that parents participate and follow recommendations at home to help build their child’s independence and strength.”

Together, these findings indicate that interventions alone are insufficient; consistent teacher involvement, reinforcement within the classroom, collaboration with specialists, and structured routines significantly enhance the likelihood of positive student outcomes. The integration of these factors aligns with the quantitative evidence, demonstrating that teachers who work more frequently with special-needs students recognize and enact strategies that maximize intervention effectiveness.

**Theme 3: Collaboration and Communication among Staff is Critical**

Teachers consistently reported that coordinated collaboration among teachers, specialists, interventionists, and administrators significantly influences student progress. Success depends on shared expectations, clear communication, and joint planning. As one teacher noted when asked about supporting factors, "Consistent communication with therapists and matching expectations from therapy in the classroom", and another explained, "When you work together and implement the same strategies, students make progress." Other participants emphasized teamwork and the value of exchanging ideas: "Teamwork, give and take because all the professionals bring great ideas to the table."

Quantitative analyses reinforce these perceptions. Among the 64 teachers surveyed, collaboration frequency varied: 14 reported collaborating daily, 21 weekly, seven monthly, 12 a few times per year, and eight rarely or never. When collaboration occurred daily or weekly, teachers were more likely to indicate that multiple interventions were beneficial. For example, of teachers who collaborated weekly, 16 of 21 (76%) agreed or strongly agreed that multiple interventions were beneficial, while daily collaborators reported similarly high levels of agreement (8 of 14; 57%). In contrast, teachers who reported collaborating rarely or a few times per year were less likely to indicate consistent effectiveness, highlighting the link between regular collaboration and intervention success. Of course, these patterns do not imply that collaboration directly causes perceptions of intervention effectiveness, or vice versa; rather, the two may mutually support each other.

These findings indicate that both frequency and quality of collaboration are essential for interventions to achieve their intended impact. Teachers recognized that when professionals work together and maintain consistent communication, students are more likely to experience effective, well-coordinated interventions. Teachers described the conditions that support strong collaboration, highlighting shared planning, communication, and mutual engagement in problem-solving as supporting factors.

**Theme 4: Coordination of Multiple Therapies Is Constrained by Time and Scheduling**

Despite strong agreement regarding the effectiveness of individualized interventions, teachers reported that systemic barriers often limit their consistent implementation. Teachers described challenges such as students being pulled from core instruction for therapy, overlapping sessions, and difficulties coordinating small-group interventions. The most frequently cited barrier involved time and scheduling constraints within the school day, particularly when students require multiple therapies or are pulled from core instruction for services.
Teachers also described staffing shortages and high caseloads as limiting factors, particularly for speech-language services. One respondent explained, "Speech therapists are severely needed! We do not have enough speech therapists, and we use virtual speech therapists, and it is a struggle." Others noted that large class sizes, competing instructional demands, and limited opportunities for collaboration further complicate efforts to provide individualized support. Due

to these barriers, successful implementation of interventions and therapies is significantly limited.

Structural differences across grade levels also appeared to influence the frequency in which individualized interventions could be delivered. Early childhood and elementary teachers reported providing daily individualized or small-group support more consistently than secondary teachers. Specifically, 25 of 29 early childhood and elementary teachers (86%) reported delivering interventions daily, compared with 8 of 13 secondary teachers (62%). A two-sample proportion z-test indicated that the proportion was significantly higher among early childhood and elementary teachers than among secondary teachers ($z = 1.80$, $p = 0.036$). These findings suggest that features of secondary school organization, including departmentalized schedules, larger student loads, and reduced instructional flexibility, may limit opportunities for individualized intervention compared with elementary settings.

These perceptions were reflected in the frequency with which teachers reported working with students who require multiple interventions. Of the 64 teachers responding to this item, 44 (70%) reported that students in their classrooms required multiple therapies “often” or “almost always.” A one-sample proportion z-test indicated that this proportion was significantly greater than 50% ($z = 2.39$, $p = 0.008$), while an additional 17 teachers (27%) reported this occurring occasionally. Only two participants indicated that such needs were rare, suggesting that coordinating multiple interventions is a routine aspect of instruction for most participants.

Analysis of cross-tabulated responses between perceived scheduling constraints and frequency of multiple therapies revealed a clear pattern: teachers who reported students requiring multiple interventions more frequently were also more likely to report that time and scheduling barriers limited effective implementation. Among teachers indicating that students required multiple therapies “almost always,” 90% (9/10) agreed or strongly agreed that scheduling constraints interfered with implementation, illustrating how increased service needs intensify logistical challenges within the school day.

Teacher responses also highlighted the instructional disruptions that occur when students must leave the classroom for multiple services. One teacher noted that “students are constantly pulled out while their teacher is delivering Tier 1 instruction,” while another explained that coordinating services such as “small group intervention with the classroom teacher, speech therapy, and small group with the dyslexia interventionist and para requires intricate planning.” These comments reflect a broader concern that while therapies themselves are beneficial, the cumulative scheduling demands can interfere with instructional time and reduce continuity of classroom learning.

Analysis across grade bands further indicated that scheduling challenges were present across the K–12 continuum rather than isolated to a single level. Teachers in early childhood and elementary settings reported the highest number of strong agreements regarding scheduling barriers (12 responses), although similar concerns were expressed by middle school and high school teachers as well. This distribution suggests that while intervention delivery structures may differ across grade levels, coordinating multiple services within existing school schedules remains a widespread logistical challenge.

Together, these findings indicate that while teachers widely recognize the importance and benefits of multiple therapies, the structural realities of the school day often constrain their coordination. This highlights a need for more integrated scheduling systems and collaborative planning structures that supports teachers, as well as students with complex learning and social support needs.

## Implications

The combination of qualitative and quantitative findings suggests that teachers' perceptions of intervention effectiveness are shaped not only by the availability of supports but also by the systems through which those supports are implemented. Teachers indicated that interventions are most effective when implemented consistently and reinforced within the classroom. Their success was frequently constrained by structural factors, including scheduling, staffing, and opportunities for collaboration among professionals. Effective intervention systems, therefore, require both strong instructional practices and organizational structures that allow educators to implement them with integrity.

At the instructional level, the findings highlight the importance of collaboration and consistency. Teachers repeatedly emphasized that interventions are most successful when classroom teachers, specialists, and therapists coordinate their efforts and reinforce shared strategies. Progress occurs when teachers reinforce the strategies delivered by therapists. Consistent communication and ongoing collaboration were identified as critical for connecting classroom instruction with therapeutic goals. Teachers also noted the value of individualized instruction in small-group or one-to-one settings, which allows educators to address specific learning needs while minimizing distractions. These findings underscore that intervention effectiveness depends heavily on coordinated instructional practices and sustained communication among professionals supporting the same students.

Despite strong awareness of effective instructional strategies, teachers reported that structural constraints often limit their ability to sustain these practices. Staffing shortages, high caseloads, and limited personnel were among the most frequently cited barriers. When schools lack sufficient specialists or interventionists, classroom teachers must absorb additional responsibilities, making consistent individualized support difficult. Scheduling conflicts were also common, as interventions were frequently delivered during core instructional time, causing students to miss Tier 1 instruction. These barriers indicate that even structured interventions may fail to achieve their potential without adequate staffing and scheduling flexibility.

The findings have concise implications for district leadership and state education policy. Expanding access to qualified interventionists, therapists, and specialized instructional staff is likely to improve intervention outcomes for students with diverse academic, linguistic, and behavioral needs. Increased staffing not only allows for more consistent delivery of specialized services but also provides space for meaningful collaboration among educators and specialists.

One promising approach is a Rotating, Concentrated Specialist Model, in which interventionists work intensively within a single school or grade-band for a defined period. This allows students to receive coordinated, high-quality support without interrupting Tier 1 instruction, and once the concentrated period is complete, the team rotates to another school or grade-band. Policies that protect collaboration, support coordinated scheduling of interventions, and provide professional development related to effective intervention practices are also critical.

Teachers emphasized that collaboration, consistency, and individualized instruction were the most important factors influencing student progress. Structural supports that enable these practices are essential for maximizing the impact of interventions. Taken together, these findings indicate that improving intervention effectiveness requires attention to both instructional practice and systemic capacity. Addressing staffing shortages, scheduling constraints, and opportunities for collaboration allows schools to leverage existing expertise among teachers and specialists to strengthen interventions designed to support students with diverse learning and behavioral needs.

The anticipated benefit of this study is that the findings provide insight into teachers' experiences and perspectives in coordinating and delivering supports for students with diverse learning and support needs. These insights can help schools and administrators better understand the practical realities, challenges, and conditions that shape classroom support, guiding current and future decisions about collaboration, staffing, and the design of inclusive interventions.

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# Unveiling The Tapestry: Exploring The Lived Experiences Of Rural High School Teachers And The Factors Influencing Retention

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## Abstract

Teacher retention remains a significant challenge for rural school districts across the United States. While adequate research focuses on teacher attrition, less attention has been given to why some educators remain in rural schools. This phenomenological qualitative study explored the lived experiences of rural public high school teachers who have remained in their positions. Guided by Ajzen's Theory of Planned Behavior, the study examined how attitudes, social norms, and perceived behavioral control influence teachers' decisions to stay. Findings identified several factors supporting retention, including supportive leadership, strong community relationships, professional autonomy, and a sense of purpose. Participants also highlighted the importance of financial incentives, adequate resources, and preparation programs addressing rural contexts. These findings offer implications for teacher education programs and policymakers seeking to strengthen rural teacher retention.

*Keyword:* teacher retention, educational leadership, rural education

## Introduction

Teacher retention remains a critical topic across educational systems. Rural school districts in the United States are plagued by a deficit of available teachers due to the location, budgeting, and support opportunities that some urban districts offer (Frahm & Cianca, 2021; Kelly & Northrop, 2015; Leech et al., 2022). The lack of certified teachers in the classroom may lead to reduced student achievement and hinder the overall quality of education (Kelly & Northrop, 2015; Rosenblatt et al., 2019). Even with the high number of rural districts in America, many rural schools are in the nation's poorest regions (Hartman et al., 2023; Miller, 2020). With the lowest retention rates in high-poverty rural schools, teacher recruitment and retention struggles may add to the distress plaguing rural schools (Ingersoll & Tran, 2023; Ulferts, 2016). Rural areas grapple with teacher shortages due to their geographical remoteness, compensation packages, and limited access to resources (Darling-Hammond & Podolsky, 2019; Frahm & Cianca, 2021; Tran et al., 2020). The escalating teacher shortages pose a significant challenge for rural districts as they contend with a dwindling pool of applicants (García & Weiss, 2019; Jennings et al., 2017).

A perilous factor influencing students' success is the availability of qualified professionals in teaching positions (Ingersoll & Tran, 2023; Tran et al., 2020). The mass departure of teachers from the profession has led to limited candidates to fill these crucial roles. The National Center for Education Statistics (2023) stated that rural schools have a more difficult time filling specialized vacancies. Their data showed 57% of rural public schools were unable to fill specialized teaching positions such as foreign language, compared to 36% vacant positions unable to be filled in cities. Ulferts (2016) found that "the challenges of rural school recruitment

and retention have a detrimental impact on student achievement due to hiring underprepared or out of their field teachers" (p. 15). Additionally, there is a direct correlation between teacher retention and student achievement, with students performing better on ELA and math standardized tests in classrooms where teachers remain consistently over time (Ronfeldt et al., 2013). A highly effective teacher in the classroom has been coined as the most distinctive school-associated determinant linked to student achievement (Tran & Smith, 2020; Ulferts, 2016).

Teacher retention can present cost savings for rural districts. Ulferts (2016) noted that teacher attrition and subsequent recruitment efforts add to the economic hardships of rural schools. The time and financial commitment needed to train and mentor new teachers sufficiently can be costly and cause severe budget constraints for the limited budgets in rural districts. Kelly and Northrop (2015) found that increased degrees of teacher attrition affect achievement and school climate. Lower compensation may contribute to dissatisfaction and burnout, leading to absenteeism and attrition (Leech et al., 2022; Shuls & Flores, 2020). Although the literature has extensively examined why teachers leave the profession, comparatively less attention has been given to understanding why teachers stay, particularly in rural landscapes. This gap limits the field's ability to design effective retention strategies grounded in teacher experience. This study provides insights to inform the development of targeted retention strategies, which can be a determining factor in maintaining a stable and experienced staff in rural schools.

## Literature Review

Rural regions face substantial challenges in addressing teacher shortages and recruitment, primarily due to their remote locations, modest compensation packages, and limited resource access (Frahm & Cianca, 2021). The increasing scarcity of teachers presents a notable hurdle for rural school districts as they struggle with a diminishing pool of candidates (Jennings et al., 2017). Darling-Hammond and Podolsky (2019) found that many rural districts labor with high teacher turnover rates, inadequate teacher salaries, and a shortage of qualified educators. Studies have linked factors such as elevated stress levels (Diliberti et al., 2021), insufficient support from leadership (Kelly & Northrop, 2015), and non-competitive salary structures (Miller, 2020) to the teacher retention challenges confronting rural areas. Ingersoll and Tran (2023) found that while the rural teaching force has not experienced the overall aging issue that urban and suburban schools have experienced in recent years, teachers in rural areas are leaving the profession before reaching retirement age.

Elevated teacher turnover rates can negatively impact students' academic achievements (Diliberti & Schwartz, 2021; Ingersoll & Tran, 2023; Kelly & Northrop, 2015; Rosenblatt et al., 2019). When educators enter the profession without adequate preparation for the stress, lack of support, and low salaries they may experience, they often choose to leave the education field altogether. This, in turn, results in school districts bearing the cost of students' diminished performance caused by the ongoing problem of high teacher attrition (Ingersoll & Tran, 2023; Shuls & Flores, 2020).

Qualified, highly effective teacher recruitment and retention is an often unspoken barrier to school performance and success. Student achievement is the focus for most schools, but the challenge of providing effective and qualified teachers for classrooms affects school performance and success. Results of several studies have provided credibility to the statement that teacher attrition and recruitment are the most profound issues that schools in America face (Coffey et al.,

2019; Greenlee & Brown, 2009; Ulferts, 2016).

## Teacher Shortage

Rural teacher shortages are shaped by geographic isolation, limited resources, lower compensation, and persistent turnover, all of which disrupt school stability and student achievement. Irwin et al. (2023) stated that the need for teachers in U.S. public and private schools has increased considerably from 2011-2012 to 2020-2021, while the number of students enrolled in teacher preparation programs has decreased by 30%. With 49.4 million students enrolled in public schools in 2021, the need for teachers to remain in classrooms is vital. Rural schools feel even more pressure due to the challenges that arise when teaching in rural school districts.

Teacher shortages have become a matter of nationwide concern, with schools serving lower socio-economic students experiencing a more pronounced impact (García & Weiss, 2019). Frahm and Cianca (2021) reported that within the first five years of teaching, roughly one-third of novice teachers will leave the profession. Perryman and Calvert (2019) found more staggering statistics: of the new teachers entering the profession, over 45% will find other occupations within their first five years, and certified teachers through alternative certification programs have 25% higher instances of reverting to another career path within those five years.
Studies predict decreased teacher retention success, an increase in student enrollment, and other uncontrollable factors to cause continued mass teacher shortages (García & Weiss, 2019; Ingersoll & Tran, 2023; Sutcher et al., 2016). The teacher turnover rates are approximately four times higher than any other profession, and some rural schools experience over 50% turnover rates (Moeller et al., 2016).

## Teacher Retention

Teacher retention plays a vital role in promoting instructional continuity and school stability, as sustained teacher presence strengthens instructional consistency and student-teacher relationships (Frahm & Cianca, 2021). In rural settings, where teachers may face unique challenges, targeted leadership support and community engagement further enhance retention by fostering a sense of belonging and professional efficacy (Tran & Dou, 2019).

Frahm and Cianca (2021) found that school support for new teachers in rural schools should be a collective responsibility throughout leadership and mentor teachers, as it has the highest impact on teacher retention. Research increasingly highlights that teachers remain in the profession not only due to structural supports but also because of meaningful relational and professional experiences. Strong administrative support, characterized by open communication, mentorship, and a collaborative school climate, consistently emerges as a key factor in sustaining teachers (Holmes et al., 2019; Tran & Dou, 2019).

Additionally, studies emphasize the importance of relationships as central to retention, with connections to students, colleagues, and the broader community reinforcing teachers' commitment to their roles (Seelig & McCabe, 2021). Teachers who experience these positive conditions are more likely to remain in the profession, demonstrating that retention is strengthened when educators feel supported, valued, and connected to both their school and community (Rosenblatt et al., 2019).

## The Unique Rural Population

The National Center for Education Statistics (2023) classifies rural areas into fringe, distant, and remote categories. The classification is given based on the distance from an urbanized area. Remote and distant rural areas differ from fringe rural areas in the proportions of schools and student enrollments. In 2019, public K-12 schools in remote rural and distant rural areas enrolled smaller percentages of all students compared to fringe rural schools. The remote rural areas enrolled two percent, while the distant rural areas enrolled six percent. The fringe rural areas enrolled the highest rural population with 12% (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023). According to Klocko and Justis (2019), the United States has over 9.6 million public school students residing in the unique rural communities. This figure dictates that about one in every five students in the United States attend a public rural school. Hartman et al. (2023) provided insight into the vast impact of the rural education system. They stated that 29.3% of the schools in America are designated as rural schools. This designation impacts 15.7 % of the total student population in the country, as they attend a rural school. In perspective, at least one-fourth of all public school students attend a rural school district in at least 18 states across America. These figures demonstrate an extensive need to help rural schools retain high-quality teachers to reach the rural students of America.

### Community

Community ties emerged as both a retention asset and a source of pressure, providing teachers with belonging, support, and purpose while also increasing visibility and blurred personal-professional boundaries. Teachers in rural communities frequently find themselves not only educating students but also serving as integral members of the rural community. The connection enables educators to develop strong bonds with students and their families, which results in collaborative and supportive learning environments (Goodpaster et al., 2012).

Teachers in rural areas often cited personal connections to the community, such as growing up there or having family ties, as well as the desire to make an impactful contribution to a specific community (Leech et al., 2022). Teachers have opportunities to be deeply involved in the community, which fosters a sense of belonging and purpose. Tran et al. (2020) found that a sense of belonging can create a connection to the community that increases teacher retention in rural communities for teachers of all experience levels.

## Challenges Faced by Rural Teachers

Rural schools face unique challenges that contribute to difficulties in retaining qualified teachers. Teaching in rural schools encompasses a rich tapestry of experiences characterized by resource constraints, diverse teaching dynamics, close community connections, unique school cultures, and opportunities for professional growth. Geographical isolation and socio-economic disparities add to the challenges faced by rural educators (Adams & Woods, 2015; Jung, 2023; Owen & Schweinle, 2021; Yoho & Moore, 2023). These challenges underscore the importance of exploring the subjective experiences of rural teachers to better understand their retention decisions.

## Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), which explains how attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control influence decision-making and behavior (Ajzen, 1991). Beyera et al. (2021) described TPB as a mixture of three intention

determinations: perceived behavioral control, attitude, and subjective norms, and implied that the three components interact to shape an individual's intention. TPB suggests the more substantial the intention, the more likely the behavior will occur. TPB was used to examine factors shaping rural teachers' decisions to remain in their current schools, with stronger intentions increasing the likelihood of persistence.

Perceived behavioral control reflects teachers' beliefs about their ability to remain in rural settings despite challenges. This includes self-efficacy, access to resources, and administrative support. Limited autonomy and insufficient support can weaken this perception, increasing attrition risk, while strong leadership support significantly improves retention (García & Weiss, 2019; Sutcher et al., 2016).

Attitudes toward rural teaching are shaped by perceived benefits and challenges. Positive attitudes often stem from meaningful relationships, community impact, and student success, while negative attitudes are associated with limited resources, lower salaries, and isolation (Jung, 2023; Kelly & Northrop, 2015; Shuls & Flores, 2020).

Subjective norms refer to social pressures influencing teachers' decisions to stay or leave. Supportive colleagues and administrators strengthen retention, whereas negative perceptions of rural teaching and high stress levels contribute to attrition (Diliberti et al., 2021; Tran & Smith, 2020).

## Methodology

This study implemented a qualitative phenomenological research design to capture the essence of why rural teachers stay in the profession by gathering and analyzing the individual lived experiences of rural high school teachers. Phenomenology was selected to allow the researcher to examine the essence of participants' lived experiences and interpret how individuals make meaning of those experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). While quantitative research provides statistical insight into teacher attrition and retention, it often lacks the depth necessary to understand the complex personal and professional factors influencing rural teachers' decisions to remain in the classroom (Brantlinger et al., 2023; Lochmiller et al., 2024; Ulferts, 2016).

Through semi-structured interviews, this study sought to better understand the professional and personal factors influencing rural teacher retention and to provide insights that may inform educational leaders, policymakers, and stakeholders seeking to strengthen teacher retention efforts in rural communities. The following research question guided this study: What are the perceived factors that contribute to a rural public high school teacher's decision to remain in the classroom?

## Population and Sample

The population for this study consisted of rural public high school teachers in the United States who had taught in the same rural school for at least five years. Rural communities were defined using the National Center for Education Statistics classification system, which categorizes rural areas as fringe, distant, or remote based on their proximity to urbanized areas (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023).

Once approval was received from the university's institutional review board participant recruitment began using professional networks, rural education associations, and social media platforms targeting rural educators. A recruitment post was developed to explain the purpose of the study, eligibility criteria, and the voluntary nature of participation.

Purposeful sampling was used to identify rural high school teachers meeting the criteria of a minimum of five years teaching at the rural high school. These posts were shared in relevant groups and forums dedicated to educators, such as professional networks and rural education associations. Snowball sampling was also used to expand recruitment by encouraging participants and colleagues to share the study with other eligible teachers.

In addition to the posts, emails were sent to randomly selected superintendents in rural school districts. To provide random selection of the school superintendents, the researcher listed all eligible rural school district superintendents in an Excel document. The document was uploaded to a random selector program. The twenty-two randomly selected rural school district superintendents were sent an email explaining the purpose and specifics of the study with a copy of the informed consent form. All interested individuals were directed to a brief online screening survey using Google Forms to confirm eligibility and gather contact information. The informed consent form was attached to the Google Form.

Interested participants completed a brief screening survey to verify eligibility. Of the initial respondents, 24 individuals met the study criteria. Systematic sampling using the *nth* method was then employed to select participants from this pool. The sampling interval was calculated by dividing the total number of eligible participants ($N = 24$) by the desired sample size ($n = 10$), resulting in selection at approximately every second participant, following a randomly determined starting point. This approach reduced selection bias and supported a more balanced representation of participants (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Participants were recruited from rural districts in Arkansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Texas, Utah, and Virginia. All participants had at least five years of experience teaching in the same rural high school, ensuring that they had sufficient experience within the rural educational context. Both traditionally and alternatively certified teachers were included, and the sample consisted of both male and female participants. All participants came from a public school setting that directly works with high school students. This study intentionally excluded private and virtual schools.

## Instrumentation and Data Collection

The primary instrument for this study was a semi-structured interview protocol consisting of 16 open-ended questions designed to explore participants' experiences teaching in rural schools and the factors influencing their decision to remain in the profession. The interview protocol was developed based on themes identified in the literature on rural teacher retention and rural education contexts. Open-ended questions allowed participants to describe their experiences in their own words, providing rich and detailed insights into the factors influencing teacher retention.

Interviews were conducted via Zoom and lasted approximately 60–90 minutes. Virtual interviews allowed participants to engage regardless of geographic location while enabling interviews to be recorded for transcription and accuracy. Interviews were recorded with participant consent and transcribed verbatim using the Otter transcription program.

To increase participant comfort and encourage open responses, rapport was established through email communication prior to interviews and informal conversation at the beginning of each session (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Participants were assigned pseudonyms to protect confidentiality.

Data collection continued until data saturation was achieved, defined as the point at which no new themes or insights emerged during analysis. Saturation became evident after the

eighth interview, as responses began to yield repetitive patterns; two additional interviews were conducted to confirm thematic consistency and ensure the robustness of the findings. Member checking took place approximately two weeks following the initial interview. Each participant had the opportunity to review the initial transcript for accuracy. Additional information needed and suggested changes by the member was made to the transcript for accuracy, ensuring validity and reliability.

## Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using a thematic analysis approach to identify patterns within the interview data. Transcripts were reviewed multiple times to develop familiarity with the data and to note initial observations. The qualitative analysis software MAXQDA was used to organize and systematically code meaningful phrases and statements related to the phenomenon under investigation. Initial codes representing key concepts were then examined for patterns and grouped into broader categories.

Through an iterative process, related categories were developed into overarching themes that reflected the shared experiences of rural high school teachers. To ensure credibility and trustworthiness, themes were reviewed and refined to confirm their alignment with the data. An audit trail documenting coding decisions and theme development was maintained, and transcripts were revisited to verify that themes accurately represented participants' experiences. Each theme was clearly defined and supported by illustrative quotations from participants to provide rich, contextual insights into the factors influencing rural teacher retention. The finalized themes were synthesized into a narrative format that addressed the research question and provided a comprehensive depiction of the lived experiences of rural teachers.

## Findings

Through thematic analysis, the data revealed insights into the motivations, challenges, and unique experiences of these educators, aligning with the study's central research question: *What are the perceived factors that contribute to a rural public high school teacher's decision to remain in the classroom?* The analysis of the data was conducted through the lens of Icek Ajzen's Theory of Planned Behavior.

For this study, Icek Ajzen's Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) provided valuable insights into understanding teacher retention in rural schools by examining the cognitive processes and determinants of behavioral control, attitudes, and norms that influence a teacher's decisions to stay or leave their position.

The following specific qualitative themes were crafted based on participant feedback: (1) personal connections to the local community influence rural public school teachers' intentions to remain at their school, (2) rural teachers experience a sense of purpose and professional fulfillment due to their substantial influence on both their students' academic success and the overall well-being of the community, (3) the passion for teaching and a desire to impact their local communities inspires rural public school teachers to continue in the profession and their local school, (4) administrative support, professional development opportunities, and mentorships are necessary to rural teacher retention, and (5) the challenge of limited resources and professional isolation is a daily battle for rural public school teachers.

### Theme 1: Community and Relationships

Personal connections to the local community strongly influenced participants' decisions

to remain in rural schools. Many teachers described the tight-knit nature of rural communities as a defining characteristic of their professional experiences and a key factor in their commitment to their schools. Participant I described being drawn to the community environment, stating, “My wife used to talk about all her experiences as a cheerleader and her brother playing football. From her stories, I knew this was the kind of place that I could see myself coaching and raising a family.”

Positive experiences with community members, participation in local events, and a strong sense of belonging were frequently mentioned. Participant B explained, “The relationships that I have in the community and with students keep me here.” Participant H echoed this sentiment, noting, “We have a lot more community support because we're the only high school in that community.” Participant J advised new teachers to consider the pace of rural life, stating, “Visit first and make sure you can slow down. The pace is very slow, but it is great to disconnect from the fast speeds of urban areas.”

Several participants reported teaching in the same schools they once attended as students, which strengthened their sense of belonging and purpose. Teachers described knowing students’ families and interacting with them outside of school, which contributed to deeper connections with the community. Participant E explained, “We have a really good community here… You teach their children; they also contribute back to the school. It's a really good community, so that's a big deal.” Similarly, Participant A stated, “I love being part of this community. Everyone knows my name, and I feel like I'm making a real difference here.”

Participants also highlighted strong community support for schools through fundraising, volunteering, and collaboration. The teachers noted that their presence and dedication were valued and appreciated by the residents. One participant described raising $7,500 through a fundraiser with strong parental involvement, demonstrating the reciprocal relationship between the school and the community.

Relationships with students were another important factor influencing retention. Participants emphasized that smaller school populations allow teachers to develop strong connections with students and provide individualized support. Participant E noted that in rural schools, students are less likely to “fall through the cracks” because teachers can provide more personalized attention.

**Theme 2: Job Satisfaction and Personal Autonomy**

Participants described a strong sense of professional fulfillment in rural schools, particularly when witnessing student growth and achievement. Moments like witnessing "lightbulb" moments where students grasp new concepts are particularly rewarding and reinforce their commitment to teaching in these settings. One participant reflected on these rewarding moments, stating, “When I see ‘lightbulb’ moments with the kids, I get reinforcement… The kids are always the aspect of the job that keeps me in education” (Participant B).

Several participants also reported that rural teaching environments provide opportunities for greater autonomy and flexibility in instructional practices. Smaller class sizes and campus populations allowed teachers to provide individualized instruction and develop meaningful relationships with students. Participants appreciated the freedom to implement creative instructional approaches. One teacher described using hybrid learning strategies to increase flexibility in the classroom, while another participant emphasized that rural teaching allowed greater independence in designing lessons and classroom management strategies. This directly impacts perceived behavioral control. Increased sense of control of the teachers’ classroom

environment positively influences their ability to remain in their positions.

Work-life integration was also noted as a benefit of rural teaching. Living close to their schools allowed teachers to remain involved in both school and community activities. However, participants acknowledged that the close connections within rural communities sometimes blurred the boundaries between their personal and professional lives. As Participant A stated, “I can’t turn off being a teacher…I’m always seen as the teacher even outside of work.” Proximity to their schools also contributed to retention for several participants, as shorter commutes allowed them to balance professional responsibilities with personal commitments.

**Theme 3: Intrinsic Motivation and Passion for Teaching**

Participants described a deep passion for teaching and a commitment to improving opportunities for students in rural communities. Many teachers expressed a strong desire to positively influence the lives of their students and contribute to the development of their communities. Key intrinsic motivators and attitudes that arose through the participants were a desire to make a difference in the lives of rural students, a collective devotion to the community, and a love for the rural lifestyle.

Participants frequently described experiencing fulfillment when helping students achieve academic success and develop confidence in their abilities. One participant emphasized the importance of expanding students’ perspectives beyond their rural communities. Participant D explained, “I wanted to bridge the gap for students…and show them the possibilities beyond their small community.” Returning to their home communities to teach also provided meaning and purpose for several participants. Many teachers viewed their work as an opportunity to give back to the communities that had shaped their own educational experiences.

Fueling their passion for teaching, participants also described enjoying the diverse roles often required in rural schools. Teachers frequently serve as coaches, club sponsors, and mentors in addition to their classroom responsibilities. While these additional responsibilities can increase workload, some participants described them as professionally rewarding. Participant C noted, “I wear so many hats…it’s rewarding to see growth in my athletes and students.”

**Theme 4: Supportive Leadership and Mentorship**

Administrative support, professional development opportunities, and mentorships are fundamental to rural teacher retention. Participants appreciated when their efforts were recognized, and they felt supported by their administrators and peers. The presence of a supportive administration was often cited as a key reason for staying at a school, especially when leadership fosters a collaborative and respectful environment. The participants shared their appreciation for leaders who were approachable and responsive to their needs. Participant I expressed, “The key to keeping teachers in place is to be visible and to be their advocate. Money, time off, and other benefits mean nothing if you don’t have a supportive and caring principal.”

Participant H credited their assistant principal for providing monumental support and encouragement, which helps them stay motivated. They stated, “My principal is incredibly supportive. She always has my back and helps me find the resources I need.” Participant A shared, “My leadership is what kept me here, just the amount of support that I have through them, the fact that I can go to them, and it doesn't feel like an us versus them mentality. It's more of an everybody working for the better of the kids.”

Administrators who actively supported teachers’ needs were instrumental in their retention. Administrative support enhances both perceived expectations and teachers’ ability to

succeed, reinforcing retention. Participant A gave an example of the type of support they receive at their school, stating, “My principal personally contacted parents on behalf of a teacher to resolve issues because they knew the parents were difficult to deal with.”

**Theme 5: Challenges and Resilience**

Although rural teaching offers unique rewards, participants described ongoing challenges related to limited resources and professional isolation. Teachers frequently discussed balancing various roles and responsibilities while navigating the blurred boundaries between personal and professional life, common in small communities. Despite these difficulties, many participants emphasized that the opportunity to positively influence students and be part of a close-knit community outweighed the challenges.

Participants identified heavy workloads as a significant concern, including multiple course preparations, extracurricular responsibilities, and limited instructional resources. These demands often contributed to stress and burnout. Technology limitations were also cited as barriers to effective instruction. One participant noted, “Wi-Fi issues disrupt our ability to teach effectively…it’s a major disadvantage…when it goes down, it pretty much shuts us down” (Participant C). One participant explained, “The workload can be overwhelming sometimes. I often feel like I'm constantly juggling numerous responsibilities” (Participant D). Another participant added that extensive teaching preparations and extracurricular expectations often contribute to teachers leaving the profession (Participant B).

Several participants also described professional isolation, particularly when serving as the only teacher in a subject area. One participant explained, “As the only English teacher, I handle several preps and grading…it’s overwhelming” (Participant E). Financial constraints were also noted, with one teacher describing the difficulty of obtaining instructional materials due to limited funding (Participant J).

These findings echo those of Goldhaber et al. (2020), who noted that the financial burden of working in rural schools often extends beyond base salaries. For example, teachers who commute long distances due to the scarcity of nearby housing options often face additional stress and financial strain. Moreover, the limited availability of community resources and amenities, such as grocery stores and childcare facilities, further compounds the financial challenges for rural educators.

Overall, while participants demonstrated resilience and commitment to their communities, findings indicate that strong community connections, supportive leadership, and intrinsic motivation support rural teacher retention. However, challenges related to workload, resource limitations, and professional isolation continue to influence teacher satisfaction and retention decisions, leaving the teachers with a feeling of a lack of control over their professional lives.

## Discussion

This study was guided by a central research question that aimed to investigate the lived experiences of rural public high school teachers and the motivations that keep them in their current rural public school. The findings revealed that personal connections to the local community influence rural public school teachers' intentions to remain at their school. Rural teachers experience a sense of purpose and professional fulfillment due to their meaningful influence on both their students' academic success and the overall well-being of the community. The passion for teaching and a desire to impact their local communities inspires rural public

school teachers to continue in the profession and their local school. Administrative support, professional development opportunities, and mentorships are vital to rural teacher retention.

Viewed through TPB, teachers' decisions to remain were shaped by positive attitudes toward teaching, supportive social expectations, and varying perceptions of control over working conditions. In this study, these components were evident in teachers' sense of purpose (attitudes), their relationships with school and community stakeholders (subjective norms), and their perceptions of autonomy, workload, and resource access (perceived behavioral control). The findings demonstrate that retention is not driven by a single factor, but rather by the interaction of these three elements.

Rural school districts across the nation encounter a persistent challenge in retaining qualified teachers. The concern of teacher retention in these unique communities is amplified by the far-reaching implications on the quality of education provided to students (Kelly & Northrop, 2015; Rosenblatt et al., 2019). This study affirmed the pivotal role of supportive leadership, community ties, and engrained motivation in retaining rural public high school teachers. These findings align with previous research emphasizing the significance of relationships and leadership in rural education. For instance, Leech et al. (2022) noted that rural teachers often find purpose in their close connections with the community, which fosters a sense of belonging. Similarly, Darling-Hammond and Podolsky (2019) highlighted the importance of administrative support in mitigating challenges related to resource constraints and professional isolation. Additionally, innate motivations, such as a commitment to student success and passion for teaching, emerged as critical retention factors. This is consistent with Holmes et al. (2019) assertion that inherent rewards notably influence teacher satisfaction and commitment, particularly in resource-scarce environments.

**Community and Relationships**

The participants' positive attitudes are felt in their passion for teaching, strong community connections and expressions of supportive leadership. Participants expressed positive attitudes towards remaining in rural schools when they felt valued by the community, experienced a strong sense of belonging, and enjoyed positive interactions with community members. They highlighted the support received from the local residents, including parents and students, as something unique to the rural community. The personal investments in the future of the students' successes and well-being provided a direct influence and connection to their future. Rural teachers play a central role in sustaining student learning and school stability (Frahm & Cianca, 2021; Ingersoll & Tran, 2023; Miller, 2020).

Schools can strengthen these relationships by increasing community involvement in school activities such as open houses, parent forums, and volunteer programs. District leaders should also recognize teacher contributions through local media and develop partnerships with local businesses and organizations to support school initiatives and expand available resources. Creating community-wide events and collaboration deepens connections and strengthens the teachers' ties to the supportive communities.

Teachers derived joy from witnessing student success and making a tangible impact on their lives. Participant D stated that "Seeing students apply what they've learned…gives me the most satisfaction." Many teachers viewed their roles as integral to improving the lives of their students and communities. Participant D wanted to "bridge the gap for students…and show them possibilities beyond their small community." These perceptions and interactions suggest that positive community experiences contribute to favorable attitudes towards continued rural

teaching. This finding is consistent with Ulferts (2016) assertion that strong community ties foster a sense of belonging and purpose among rural teachers. Similarly, Tran et al. (2020) emphasized the role of community engagement in enhancing teacher satisfaction and retention. Teachers in rural areas frequently serve as integral members of their communities, participating in events, mentoring students outside the classroom, and engaging with families on a personal level. This dynamic creates a reciprocal relationship in which educators feel valued and supported by their communities, as well as a part of the community unit. Participants noted that these bonds not only enhance their professional satisfaction but also strengthen their commitment to the rural schools and high school students they serve. This finding validates the Goodpaster et al. (2012) claim that the connections within the rural communities between the teacher and families results in a more collaborative and supportive learning environment. The connections create a community extension of the school and support systems.

The participants expressed experiencing positive subjective norms through support from family, friends, and colleagues. The received support encouraged teachers to remain in their rural positions. Participant H stated, “My family has always encouraged me to stay in this community and give back.” Teachers felt a strong sense of obligation to their communities, which valued their contributions. “Parents and community members actively support teachers and make us feel appreciated.” (Participant C). Support and positive interactions with colleagues enhanced teachers’ sense of belonging. Participant J expressed, “Relationships with colleagues keep me motivated and inspired.”

Retention is deeply influenced by subjective norms based on the social pressure and sense of obligation felt toward the community. School districts should prioritize the recruitment of local residents and former students who already possess an "engrained motivation" and deep connection to the community landscape through “Grow Your Own” initiatives. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2023), students graduating from an urban school are 19% more likely to obtain a bachelor’s degree. Targeting students through their early high school years could help develop teachers and entice them to return to teach in their own schools. Developing teachers within the rural school system would help to keep graduates in the community and a continuation of the community connections.

However, the high visibility and confinements of rural life can also introduce challenges. Teachers may feel additional pressure to meet community expectations or experience a lack of privacy in their personal lives. Gallo (2020) confirmed that the high visibility can cause more enhanced scrutiny by community members compared to those in the urban communities. Despite these challenges, most participants expressed that the benefits of close community relationships outweighed the drawbacks, as they provided a strong support system and a sense of shared purpose.

Teacher preparation programs must move beyond a "one-size-fits-all" approach to explicitly address the unique demands of rural education. The implementation of rural-specific clinical placements is suggested. Preparation programs should partner with rural districts to offer extended student-teaching residencies that allow pre-service teachers to experience the "slow pace" and high visibility of rural life. This aligns with research suggesting that early exposure to rural environments reduces "reality shock" and improves long-term retention.

Programs would benefit from the expansion of curriculum based on community integration. Preparation programs should include coursework on "community as a classroom," teaching educators how to build reciprocal relationships with local stakeholders and navigate the blurred boundaries between personal and professional life. An additional curriculum addition

that would benefit future rural teachers would be the inclusion of multi-subject and unique instructional training options: Because rural teachers often manage multiple course preparations and face technological limitations, teacher preparation programs should train candidates in multi-grade instructional strategies and low-resource pedagogical alternatives.

**Job Satisfaction and Personal Autonomy**

Rural teachers experience a sense of purpose and professional fulfillment due to their convincing influence on both their students' academic success and the overall well-being of the community. The findings of this study highlight job satisfaction and personal autonomy as critical factors influencing rural high school teachers' decisions to remain in their roles. Many participants expressed satisfaction derived from the close-knit relationships they formed with students and the ability to tailor their teaching methods to meet the unique needs of their classrooms. The freedom to have autonomy within their own classrooms embedded deeper buy-in and commitment to the successes of students. This aligns with Tran et al. (2020) and Miller (2020), who emphasized that the smaller class sizes and greater flexibility often found in rural schools contribute considerably to teacher satisfaction.

The autonomy afforded to rural teachers allows for greater creativity and innovation in lesson planning and classroom management. Participants noted that this freedom enables them to address their students' needs in meaningful and personalized ways. This finding is consistent with Shuls and Flores (2020), who identified professional autonomy as a key driver of job satisfaction, particularly in rural settings where teachers often wear multiple hats and have a more significant influence on school decisions. This is validated by the study by Sulit (2020) finding that teacher retention is influenced by the perceptions of micromanagement, closed door decision making and reduced autonomy.

However, the findings also revealed that while autonomy is a source of satisfaction, it can be accompanied by challenges such as an increased workload and limited access to professional development opportunities. These findings reflect the unique nature of the rural teaching environments, as presented by Darling-Hammond and Podolsky (2019). This study illuminates the need for educational leaders and policymakers to recognize and preserve the elements of classroom autonomy that contribute to teacher satisfaction and longevity. District leadership should also focus on building teacher capacity, fostering collaborative school cultures, and increasing teacher autonomy while managing workload expectations. Administrators can support teachers by maintaining open communication, seeking teacher input, and providing professional development tailored to the unique challenges of rural education, including professional isolation, multi-grade instruction, and technology integration.

To address workload pressures often experienced by rural teachers, school leaders should explore staffing solutions and scheduling adjustments that reduce compound course preparations and administrative responsibilities while providing additional planning and collaboration time. Addressing these resource disparities across rural schools would help reduce the unique workload pressures facing rural high school teachers.

**Intrinsic Motivation and Passion for Teaching**

Intrinsic motivation, expressed through a passion for teaching, commitment to student success, and desire to serve the community, was a central factor in teachers' decisions to remain in rural schools. This aligns with findings by Leech et al. (2022) and Holmes et al. (2019), who noted that rural teachers often possess a profound sense of duty to make a difference in their

students' lives. Intrinsic motivation acts as a buffer against stressors like resource limitations and workload demands, as suggested by Miller (2020) and Yoho and Moore (2023). Teachers in this study frequently expressed a sense of purpose derived from their ability to make a meaningful difference in students' lives, mirroring the conclusions of Leech et al. (2022).

Intrinsic motivation emerged as a cornerstone of teacher retention in rural areas, with participants frequently highlighting their passion for teaching and their commitment to student success as critical factors influencing their decision to remain in the profession. These findings align with Holmes et al. (2019) and Jung (2023), who documented that teachers often draw satisfaction and fulfillment from their roles, particularly when they perceive their work as meaningful and impactful. In the rural setting, this motivation is often amplified by the unique opportunities to form strong, lasting relationships with students, families, and the community members.

**Supportive Leadership and Mentorship**

Administrative support strengthened both subjective norms and perceived behavioral control by signaling that teachers were valued and not navigating rural challenges alone. Participants highlighted the significance of school administrators who foster trust, encourage collaboration, and provide emotional and professional support. This corroborates research by Darling-Hammond and Podolsky (2019) and Tran and Smith (2020), who identified administrative support as a key determinant of teacher retention. Supportive leadership helps alleviate challenges like workload stress and professional isolation, which are common in rural schools (Diliberti et al., 2021; Sutcher et al., 2016).

Administrative support is a primary determinant of a teacher's "perceived behavioral control" and intention to stay. Administrators need a visible and advocacy-based leadership approach. Principals and district leadership must be trained to serve as active advocates for their staff, intervening in difficult parent-teacher interactions and ensuring teachers have the necessary resources to succeed.

Low perceived control was expressed through the limited access to resources, inadequate support systems, and feelings of isolation. It caused the participants to have a low perceived control over their teaching environment and their ability to effectively fulfill their professional responsibilities. Participant B expressed that she used her district bonus for paying taxes and other things since they are one of the lowest paid districts in their area. Since the district removed the bonus, they have feelings of very low perceived control and have contemplated leaving the district.

Mentorship programs can further support retention by pairing new teachers with experienced rural educators. These relationships can reduce professional isolation, strengthen instructional support, and sustain teacher motivation (Tran & Dou, 2019). Supporting teachers' professional growth and well-being is vital for longevity.

**Challenges and Resilience**

Rural teaching provides unique benefits, but the challenge of limited resources and professional isolation is a daily battle for rural public high school teachers. Teachers described material shortages, technology interruptions, and isolation as sole subject-area instructors as ongoing barriers to job satisfaction. These findings validate the research by Darling-Hammond and Podolsky (2019) and Diliberti et al. (2021), who identified resource limitations as a necessary barrier to teacher retention in rural schools. Addressing these challenges requires

systemic changes, including increased funding and targeted policies to support rural educators. Ulferts (2016) argued that targeted interventions addressing resource deficits can further enhance rural teachers' commitment. To combat the professional isolation common in rural schools, districts should facilitate virtual or regional mentorship networks where teachers teaching a course without a school based professional learning community can collaborate with peers in the same subject area from neighboring rural districts. School and district leadership need to have a keen sensitivity to the teacher workload within their school. Leaders should conduct regular workload audits to mitigate burnout from excessive extracurricular responsibilities and "multiple hats" worn by rural staff.

Resource constraints and financial incentives were identified as acute factors impacting teacher retention in rural schools. While teachers in this study demonstrated remarkable resilience in navigating limited resources, they consistently emphasized that financial and material deficits imposed significant challenges, reinforcing findings from Hu et al. (2023) and Frahm and Cianca (2021). Leadership should establish equalized budgeting and rural teaching incentives to reduce resource and financial constraints.

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## Interview Protocol

**Background/Context**

1. Can you tell me about your background and how you came to teach at a rural high school?

2. What is your highest degree complete?
3. How long have you been teaching in a rural setting?
4. What brought you to this specific school? How long have you been teaching in your current school?

**Motivations**

5. What are some benefits of working in a rural school district?
6. What factors have influenced your decision to continue teaching in a rural high school?
7. What aspects of your job give you the most satisfaction?
8. How do relationships with students, colleagues, and the community impact your decision to remain in teaching?

**Challenges**

9. What are some disadvantages of working in a rural school district?
10. What are the biggest challenges you face as a teacher in a rural high school?
11. Do you feel that your work-life balance is affected by teaching in a rural setting? How do you manage it?

**Resources**

12. What kind of support or resources have been most helpful in sustaining your motivation to continue teaching?
13. Do you find that benefits such as your salary amount, health insurance and retirement, administrative support, collegiality, the ability to assume leadership roles, the concept of community, the school schedule or calendar, the concept of time, the love of your subject area etc. impact your decision to remain in the classroom?

**Reflection**

14. Looking ahead, what factors would influence your decision to stay in or leave the teaching profession?
15. What are some strategies, procedures, or specific benefits that administrators of rural schools can utilize to retain the teachers already in place?
16. What advice would you give to new teachers considering a career in a rural high school?