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Innovation through Necessity: Investigating Teaching Practices in Rural Schools

by

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Abstract

Rural schools are a historic and contemporary feature of the Canadian educational landscape. They offer a unique learning and teaching experiences for students as well as the opportunity for researchers to investigate alternative organizational and instructional models. Despite their prevalence, rural schools remain relatively under-researched within a Canadian context with little agreement concerning the influence of teaching practices within rural contexts on student achievement. The purpose of this research is to (a) review some of the empirical research literature on teaching practices in rural schools and (b) discuss common features of teaching practices within rural schools such as multi-grade classrooms, team teaching and teacher collaboration, and educators filling multiple roles such as teaching principals; investigate if and what kind of specialized training is needed for rural educators; and, examine the impact of these teaching practices in rural schools on student engagement and academic achievement. Investigating teaching practices in rural schools gives researchers, educators, and policy makers the opportunity to explore the applicability of these practices outside the rural context.

Keywords: rural education, multi-grade classrooms, teaching principals, rural teacher training, rural student achievement

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Dedication

I would not be where I am in my career without the Chilcotin. It has shaped not only this project, but my course of study, my career path, and my life. I was lucky enough to stumble my way to the right place. Life only gives so many chances to be who you need to be, where you need to be. I can only wish this kind of luck for others.

To my Alexis Creek family, thank you for welcoming me, encouraging me, and supporting me through this journey and many others. I am proud to walk beside you.

To my family, your love, as always, means I stand taller.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

For many, rural schools rarely enter the conversation around education. For the public, they may elicit thoughts of tradition or conservative environments or perhaps of communities shrinking in the face of changing economies and centralizing forces. For those involved in school district or provincial planning and policy making, rural schools may represent the rising cost of providing education to only a few. However, both of these perspectives miss the unique intersection of factors such as smallness, limitations of resources and services, and relative isolation that occur in rural school environments. This alternative narrative positions rural schools as sites of considerable research interest, providing glimpses into alternative organizational and instructional structures and their impact on learning experiences. Within the scope of this study, I seek to explore these narratives. I will initially identify my own personal interest and experience within the context of rural schools. I will then review relevant literature to investigate if there are common features to rural teaching practice, how and if educators are trained in these practices, and investigate how these practices impact student learning.

Personal Interest

I am a young educator still within the first five years of my career in education. Driven by the job opportunities available in rural education, I left the urban centers of the lower mainland of British Columbia (BC) where I had lived for the last 10 years and received my post-secondary education and teacher training. I secured a continuing teaching contract in a small rural elementary and junior secondary school in Alexis Creek within the West Chilcotin region of BC. I spent three years at this school in the role of a junior high school classroom teacher. I taught multiple subjects in a multi-grade 8-10 classroom, most of which I was not formally trained to teach. In my third year, I was promoted to the interim principal of the school. Now in the fourth

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year of my career, I am in that administrative position in a continuing capacity. I am the youngest administrator currently working in the district, one of a handful of female administrators, and one of only two female administrators that work with high school age students.

My interest in rural education practices is grounded in this experience, both the challenges and opportunities. I have enjoyed the accelerated career trajectory that is sometimes possible in the landscape of rural education. I have had the opportunity to teach many things outside my formal training and as a result developed the ability to adapt, learn, and grow in my professional skills. I have also often felt unprepared, untrained, and challenged by the circumstances and context of the learning environment I work in. Many days have felt like I must survive one challenge only to face another. I have also experienced the incredible level of collaboration and care demonstrated by a staff that works together against continuous challenges such as lack of access to resources, frequent transience of teaching staff and students, as well as high needs classrooms informed by high levels of poverty, drug and alcohol abuse, and gang violence in our community. I have also been excited to participate in the daily creativity and innovation that occurs in our school and classrooms, often driven by necessity and propelled by the strength of relationships between staff members and students. In light of these experiences, I am motivated to explore how rural landscapes shape the educational experiences of other teachers, administrators, and students. I am interested in what shared challenges may be experienced and if there are patterns teaching practices take in response to rural environments.

Background

Rural schools are of interest in Canadian education as they dominate a fair expanse of Canadian geography and factor into the planning of many provinces and school districts across

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the country. They also represent sites of interest for researchers as they offer unique examples of curriculum delivery, instructional practice, and leadership very much informed by the demands of their place and community. “Innovative out of necessity” (Wallin, Anderson, & Penner, 2009, p 5), rural schools provide insight into alternative practices that may additionally have application outside of the rural context (Wallin & Newton, 2014). Often, the challenges of limited access to resources and external supports as well as limits to organization and infrastructure typically found in schools act as a crucible for creativity, collaboration, and community.

Several key themes in the research emerged over the course of my investigation: (1) common features of teaching practice in rural schools such as multi-grade classrooms, small class size, educators filling multiple roles such as teaching principals, as well as team teaching and collaboration (2) training of pre-service and in-service teachers for the particular demands and challenges of rural teaching; and, (3) student engagement and achievement in rural contexts. These themes help build an understanding of rural schools as sites of considerable innovation in response to necessity.

The first theme that emerges in the literature indicates that there are common features to teaching practice in rural schools such as multi-age programming, team teaching and teacher collaboration, and educators filling multiple roles such as teaching principals (Harris, 2014; Wallin & Newton, 2014). These practices are a response to the distinct challenges faced by rural schools such as small numbers of students, limited staff, limited access to supporting services and resources (Harris, 2014; Wallin & Newton, 2014). These commonalities in challenges and the response to challenges point to a pattern that makes rural teaching distinct in both its lived experience and its practice (Barter, 2008; Preston, 2012; Wallin, 2014).

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The second theme that emerges from the research on rural schools is to what extent current pre-service teacher education programs and in-service professional development prepares and supports rural educators. Several studies investigate the effectiveness of pre-service teacher training programs specifically designed to promote and support rural teaching (Azano, & Stewart, 2015; Barter, 2008; Kline et al, 2013; Trinidad et al, 2014). Additionally, a number of studies investigate the role of in-service training or participation of practicing rural teachers in action research (Glover et al, 2016; Peterson, 2012; Peterson & Portier, 2017; Steele, 2013). Findings indicate that rural schools as a site of research has positive implications for both knowledge about instructional practices in these environments but also in building the skills of educators who participate in studies through action- research, reflection, or advocacy for supports of perceived needs (Peterson, 2012; Peterson & Portier, 2017).

The third major theme that emerged from a review of literature was the level of student engagement and achievement in rural schools. Many studies acknowledged the challenges facing rural schools. For example, many of these schools serve populations that also experience high levels of poverty and economic transience (Corbett & Forsey, 2017; Harris, 2014). Research indicates lower levels of student achievement in key areas such as literacy when rural schools are compared with their urban counterparts (Canadian Council on Learning, 2006). However, many case studies also documented high levels of student engagement, examples of successful student learning, and increases in student achievement (Harris, 2014; Stockard, 2011; Wilcox, Angelis, Baker, & Lawson, 2014). There was disagreement in the literature in the area of student achievement where large scale assessments identified achievement gaps between rural and urban students (Canadian Council on Learning, 2006; Shaienks, 2007) while individual studies often

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pointed to the positive impact of rural teaching practices on student learning (Harris, 2014; Stockard, 2011; Wilcox et al, 2014).

Research Questions

The purpose of the first part of this study is to review the empirical literature on rural teaching practices. The following questions guided inquiry throughout the review:

1. Are there common features to teaching practices in rural schools?
2. Does current educator training and professional development support and prepare educators for rural education practice?
3. What are the impacts of teaching practices in rural schools on student engagement and achievement?

Definitions

Several terms within the literature review require further clarification:

Rural: While the very definition of “rural” is a central piece of much discussion in the research. The lack of any clear definition, opens the door to a variety of experiences and expressions of ‘rural’ (Barter, 2008). Key similarities include distance from services and resources typically found in centers such as groceries, government offices and services, major health care services (Kline et al, 2013). Rural schools are also invariably described as small schools, having a hundred students or less (Wildy & Clarke, 2012).

Remote: A close cousin to rural communities, remote communities refer to those communities which are significantly removed from urban centers either due to distance or access.

Teaching Principals: Principals who also work as classroom teachers during the course of an instructional day.

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Multi-grade: Classrooms composed of two or more grade levels. These classes typically receive instruction as one group, multiple curriculums are taught simultaneously. This is opposed to traditional single grade classrooms, where one grade level of curriculum is presented at a time.

Pre-service training: Courses and practicum experiences that occur as part of a teacher's training before they receive teaching credentials. These are normally offered through or facilitated by post-secondary institutions as part of a teacher candidate's formal training.

In-service training: Training of currently practicing classroom teachers and administrators through programs, participation in action research, workshops, or other learning activities.

Research Pathway

I began the research process with an interest in how rural teaching practices may be unique from other educational contexts. I wondered whether a narrative of deficits, one that emphasized challenges, lack of access to resources, and achievement gaps would prevail or would a narrative of strengths emerge, one that spoke to the creativity and innovation possible in rural school environments. While something of this duality remains in any discussion of rural education within available research, I was surprised by the amount of research I found that used rural schools as an opportunity to explore the possibilities of alternative models of curriculum delivery and instructional practice. It became clear that rural teaching practices do indeed differ from those in urban centers in some key ways. Research reveals that this difference is deeply informed by the landscape of rural communities. Differences arise from pressures of size, access to resources, demographics, and place-based influences. Central to discourse was multi-grade classrooms, as well as educators and administrators fulfilling more than one role within the

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school, centrality of relationships to the learning process, connections to community, alternate curriculum delivery such as distance education or technology use.

I constrained my search to research done in roughly the last ten years, between 2007 and 2017 with a few outliers from the early 2000's of importance in the field. Education in rural landscapes occurs the world over. A fair amount of literature is devoted to its many faces in a manner that encompasses global diversity. For my purposes, I have narrowed my exploration of rural education research to include Canada, the United States, and Australia. These three countries share some important similarities in geography, economies, social and cultural make-up of their rural and remote communities. I found the most valuable research worked with Canadian or Australian data. Similarities included the immense geography of both countries, the prevalence of rural and remote communities throughout this landscape, and the demographics of these communities which often include higher proportion of Indigenous peoples than urban centers. Importantly, they also share colonial histories which while unique from each other share historic and continued patterns of colonization that inform the interaction of Indigenous peoples of these communities with education systems.

I explored my topic in roughly three rounds of research. In the first round, I used very broad search terms such as "rural teaching", "rural schools", "rural principals", and "rural education". I further narrowed my search to K-12 public education systems. I made an effort to include both quantitative and qualitative research, but found that qualitative research far outweighed the amount of quantitative in these topic areas. Using the research from this first round, I began to identify themes found in the research: (1) rural teaching practices or the experience of being an educator in a rural environment, (2) pre-service and in-service training or professional development for rural educators or educators preparing to work in rural schools, (3)

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student achievement in rural schools. I used these themes to further refine my search terms and used many of the authors, journals, and citations discovered in my first round to continue to build my understanding of the available research. My third round of research represented a similar process of refinement of search terms and categorization into established themes.

In the subsequent section, I examine available literature to explore common features of teaching practice in rural schools, investigate how current training supports pre-service and in-service teachers in rural classrooms, and show how teaching practices in rural schools impact student achievement. In the following review, empirical evidence suggests that rural schools share common features such as teaching principals as an instructional leadership model, multi-age classrooms, and the significant influence of community on the personal lives and teaching practice of educators in rural schools. The literature finds that specific training supports are beneficial to educators as identified features of rural teaching practice at both the pre-service and in-service levels. The literature demonstrates no conclusive insight into how teaching practice in rural schools impact student achievement, noting positive case studies but indicating that overall rural-urban gaps in student achievement persist.

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Chapter 2: Literature Review

A review of the literature on rural schools in Canadian, American, and Australian contexts provides insight into the form and function of such schools. Studies often focus on the unique features of rural schools such as teaching principals, small school or classroom size, and multi-grade classrooms (Clarke, Stevens, & Wildy, 2006; Harris, 2014; Newton & Wallin, 2013; Preston, 2012; Wallin & Newton, 2014). Others explore features of teaching training, professional development, and teaching practice within a rural context, tackling inquiry into how and in what ways teachers and administrators are prepared for teaching within rural schools (Ajayi, 2013; Azano & Stewart, 2015; Barter, 2008; Glover et al., 2016; Kline, White, & Lock, 2013; Trinidad, Sharplin, Ledger, & Broadly, 2014). Student achievement and learning experiences within rural schools forms a third area of general inquiry within the literature with debate over the existence of an urban-rural gap in student achievement featured heavily (Smit & Humpert, 2012; Wilcox, Angelis, Baker, & Lawson, 2014; Portier & Peterson, 2017; Steele, 2013; Stockard, 2011). Research tends to emerge from institutions in proximity to more rural areas and in countries such as Canada and Australia where rural schools remain a relatively common phenomenon within these respected education systems. In this review, I explore the findings to three questions posed within the literature: (1) Are there common features to teaching practices in rural schools? (2) Does current educator training and professional development support and prepare educators for rural education practice? (3) What are the impact of teaching practices in rural schools on student engagement and achievement?

Common features of teaching practice in rural schools

Introduction. Rural schools continue to serve a multitude of communities across Canada as well as other countries which share similar geographic expanses and population distribution

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such as the United States and Australia (Preston, 2012; Smit & Humpert, 2012; Wildy & Clarke, 2012). The literature indicates that schools in rural or remote areas of these countries share a number of similarities that shape the learning experiences and professional lives of those that learn and work within them. These similarities include a shared definition of rurality within an educational context (Wallin & Newton, 2014) such as (a) teaching principals as a common leadership standard (Clarke et al., 2006; Newton & Wallin, 2013; Wallin & Newton, 2014), (b) multi-age and/or multi-grade programming (Wallin & Newton, 2014), and (c) strong connections to community (Clark et al., 2006; Harris, 2014; Preston, 2012; Wallin & Newton, 2014). In the following section, this review examines empirical literature which answers the question: Are there common features to teaching practices in rural schools? Findings are divided into three sub sections (a) teaching principals, (b) multi-age programming, and (c) the role of community.

Review. Literature on rural schools often seeks to provide a definition of rurality within which to frame their findings. While in agreement that there is no one definition of rural, particularly as the studies examined rural schools in several different countries with variability in size of school, grade levels within the school, size of community, and degree of remoteness from urban centers, the literature does indicate that there are commonalities (Wildy & Clarke, 2012). These most often include a geographic distance from urban centers, relatively small numbers of students within a school or classroom, and only a few staff members working within a school (Clark et al., 2006; Newton & Wallin, 2013; Wallin & Newton, 2014; Wildy & Clark, 2012). Table 1 illustrates the school demographics in four of the studies reviewed. Two studies drew from the same data set collected in Canada while the other two were from Australia.

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Table 1

Table Indicating Rural School Enrollment and Grade Level in Four Canadian and Australian Studies

Authors	Total Number of Schools within study	Grade Levels	Total Enrollment	Country within which data collected
Newton & Wallin, 2013;	12	K-4	22	Canada (Manitoba)
Wallin & Newton, 2014		K-7	24	Canada (Manitoba)
		K-8	44	Canada (Manitoba)
		K-8	58	Canada (Manitoba)
		K-8	70	Canada (Manitoba)
		5-8	36	Canada (Manitoba)
		K-12	105	Canada (Manitoba)
Clarke et al., 2006	4	unavailable	28-35	Australia (Queensland)
Wildy & Clarke, 2012	1	unavailable	61	Australia (Western Australia)

Note: Data

Table 1 indicates that while variability does exist in overall size and grade level composition, schools show consistently small total enrollment over large grade level spreads. While not all studies examined discussed total number of staff members within the school, all studies indicated that the school administrator also worked as a classroom teacher at least part of the time due to the relatively small size of the school (Clarke et al., 2006; Newton & Wallin, 2013; Wallin & Newton, 2014; Wildy & Clarke, 2012).

Teaching principals. A common feature of rural schools identified in the literature is the phenomenon of teaching principals. Teaching principals are typically defined as school administrators that also engage in direct classroom instruction as a significant part of their

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workload (Clarke et al., 2006; Newton & Wallin, 2013; Wallin & Newton, 2014). This model is noted to be at odds with administrative roles in larger school contexts where typically supervision and management dominate day to day duties (Newton & Wallin, 2013; Wallin & Newton, 2014). It was also noted that due to the small nature of the schools, administrators often fulfilled other duties typically outside of an administrator role such as custodial, secretarial, and building maintenance (Wallin & Newton, 2014). As a leadership model, the literature suggests that as teaching principals remain immersed in front line teaching practice there are a number of positive impacts including role-modeling instructional leadership, increasing credibility with teaching staff, reducing need for discipline through direct relationships with students, and a greater sense of self efficacy (Newton & Wallin, 2013; Wallin & Newton, 2014). The literature also discusses potential draw backs within the teaching principal model such heavy workloads, reduced time for administrative duties, and the frequent need to step away from the classroom (Newton & Wallin, 2013).

The literature also identifies some common characteristics of teaching principals. These principals are often novices, new to administrative roles within the previous three years (Ewington et al., 2008; Stevens, & Wildy, 2006; Wildy & Clarke, 2012) and often new to the communities they serve having taken administrative positions in a rural school as part of a career progression pattern identified as common in both Australia (Ewington et al., 2008) and Canada (Newton & Wallin, 2013). Several studies indicated that in addition to frequently being new to school leadership, teaching principals often cited isolation from professional peers as a challenge to both professional development and sense of well-being (Clarke et al., 2006; Ewington et al., 2008; Newton & Wallin, 2013; Wildy & Clarke, 2012). This can be additionally challenging, as they also occupy a complex role within the community as lines between professional and personal

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life are not easily drawn due to the smallness of the communities within which they work (Ewington et al., 2008; Newton & Wallin, 2013; Wallin & Newton, 2014). The literature also identified a lack of formal training, identifying informal professional development activities such as on the job experience and trial and error as primary training received by teaching principals (Newton & Wallin, 2013).

Multi-age classrooms. Another common feature of rural schools in Canada and Australia identified within the literature was multi-age or multi-grade classrooms (Harris, 2014; Newton & Wallin, 2014; Smit & Humpert, 2012). These classrooms are formed out of necessity as a relatively small number of students across different ages and grades are combined into one cohort (Harris, 2014; Newton & Wallin, 2013). As a direct result of these configurations, the literature indicated that teachers and administrators cited mutual learning as older students mentor younger ones (Harris, 2014), maintaining relationships with students over the span of a number of years (Harris, 2014), and focus on formative learning as opposed to peer level grade progression (Smit & Humpert, 2012) as positive implications. Most of the studies examined for this review cited previous literature that investigated the benefits of multi-grade classrooms in other contexts, either not specifically in rural regions or in countries outside of the area of focus for this review (Newton & Wallin, 2014; Harris, 2014; Smit & Humpert, 2012).

Community. Another common finding of the studies examined was the close role of community in rural schools both in the role it played within the school and within the personal and professional lives of the school's staff (Clark et al., 2006; Newton & Wallin, 2013; Preston, 2012; Wallin & Newton, 2014; Wildy & Clarke, 2012). Close relationships with community were found to empower teachers by informing practice and communication, but also resulted in a blending of their personal and professional life that some adapted to and others did not (Preston,

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2012). Interestingly, several Australian studies noted that administrators and teachers were rarely from their communities they served and had not necessarily been raised or lived in rural communities prior to their posting (Clarke et al., 2006). Another study commented that those teachers and principals that adapted best to the blurring of professional and personal lives in rural communities had grown up in rural environments themselves and so anticipated and adapted to the cultural and lifestyle differences between urban and rural communities as well as pressures of high visibility within the community (Preston, 2012). Narrative accounts by teaching principals in several rural communities in Canada demonstrated that participants often discussed meeting and talking with parents about school issues during the course of their personal life outside school times (Newton & Wallin, 2013; Wallin & Newton, 2013).

Discussion. In summary, this review examines empirical literature which answers the question: are there common features to teaching practices in rural schools? A review of the literature produces some insight into common features of rural teaching practice, particularly in Australia and Canada. The prevalence of teaching principals is one such feature. The literature suggests that many novice teaching principals take up their role in rural schools as a beginning step in an administrative career and implies that they are likely to transition to non-rural environments at later stages of their career (Ewington, 2008). However, there is little larger investigation of these career patterns, rate of attrition of teaching principals within rural schools, or whether the skills or habits formed in rural administration generalize to larger schools or more urban environments. There is also little investigation or comment on the turn-over rate of administrators or teachers within rural schools and how this might impact students and community. While one study pointed to the possible positive impacts of administrators who are immersed in classroom teaching (Wallin & Newton, 2014), further investigation into the

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effectiveness of the teaching principal as a leadership model is needed to verify these assertions. Rural schools would provide an excellent site for such investigation due to the prevalence of the teaching principal as a leadership model. Additionally, further exploration of the impact of the “double load phenomenon” (Ewington et al., 2008) on rural teaching principals would be of interest as many of the studies examined identified potential factors of vulnerability such as isolation, lack of peer support, inexperience, and fulfilling multiple roles simultaneously (Clarke et al., 2006; Ewington et al., 2008; Newton & Wallin, 2013; Wallin & Newton, 2014; Wildy & Clarke, 2012) that might affect resiliency over time.

A review of the literature produced multi-age or multi-grade classrooms as another common feature. Most studies examined commented that these classroom formations were out of necessity due to the smallness of the student populations within rural schools (Harris, 2014). Examined studies did not include information on existing classroom demographics so little can be inferred from what classroom configurations are common or effective in Canadian or Australian contexts. This would form a valuable area of further inquiry in the future. The anecdotal narratives shared in the findings of one study demonstrated that teachers enjoyed multi-grade instruction within their rural school (Harris, 2014) and further investigation into teacher’s self-perception of efficacy within multi-grade classrooms may be of interest. Additionally, further investigation into how curriculum delivery is managed by teachers of multi-grade classrooms and how instructional practices may differ from larger schools with same grade classrooms may give further insight into the effectiveness and overall desirability of multi-grade classrooms within Canadian and Australian contexts.

The literature also frequently commented on the role of community the professional and personal lives of teachers and administrators in rural school. One study indicated that the

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interdependence between school and community is heightened within the rural context and this impacts both leadership and teaching practice significantly (Clark et al., 2006). Several Canadian studies also emphasized the importance of community within the school itself, pointing to significant levels of collaboration, role sharing, and care amongst staff members as vital to the smooth operation of the school and quality of student learning (Newton & Wallin, 2014; Wallin & Newton, 2013). While the literature does suggest that there are both positive and negative aspects to a blurring of roles, it does not investigate whether this particular kind of working environment contributes to longevity of either teachers or principals in their roles. Further inquiry into rates of attrition within rural schools might provide further insight into the dynamics of rural schools and communities.

Conclusion. In conclusion, the literature findings presented in this review show that there are commonalities within rural schools. This includes such features as teaching principals, multi-age classrooms, and the heavy influence of community in the classrooms as well as in the professional and personal lives of principals and teachers in rural schools. The literature demonstrates that these commonalities are shared across rural schools in both Australia and Canada, definitely shaping the teaching and learning experiences of teachers, administrators, and students within these schools. This is of interest as it suggests that rural schools present specific challenges and demand a special skill set of educators in these settings. This indicates that investigation into how educators are prepared for these challenges both in pre-service and in-service contexts.

In the following section, the relationship between these features of rural schools and the preparation of teachers and administrators for working in rural schools will be examined. Rural schools present a number of demands such as fulfilling multiple roles as seen in teaching

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principals, teaching multi-age classrooms and therefore balancing curriculums at multiple age levels simultaneously, as well as managing cultural differences and community pressures exerted by rural communities on teachers and administrators. The following section will investigate these relationships between the features of rural schools and is investigated using empirical evidence as support for answering the second research question: Does current educator training and professional development support and prepare educators for rural educational practice?

Current educator training for rural schools

Introduction. A review of the literature produces some insight into the preparation of teachers and administrators for work in rural schools. The findings from within the literature can be divided into roughly two categories: (a) pre-service training for teachers and administrators and (b) in-service training and professional development for teachers and administrators already working in rural schools. Pre-service training for educators in rural schools is primarily delivered through teacher education programs found in post-secondary institutions (Ajayi, 2013). The literature indicates that programs specifically designed to support teachers bound for rural schools do exist and often take the form of rural placements for practicums (Kline, White, & Lock, 2013). A common theme found within the literature was the development of these programs being frequently motivated by the need to attract educators to rural schools (Kline et al., 2013). In-service and professional development for teachers and administrators is found to be delivered in a number of ways, with the most common theme being to meet the needs of students in contexts of multi-age classrooms and limited access to educational specialists (Wallin & Reimer, 2012; Wildy & Clark, 2012). In the following section, this review examines empirical literature which answers the question: Does current educator training and professional

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development support and prepare educators for rural educational practice? Findings will be further divided into two subsections (a) pre-service training and (b) in-service training.

Review. Findings within the literature indicated that rural educators could benefit from specific training at both the pre-service and in-service levels to address the demands posed by the challenges of rural schools such as multi-age classrooms and small schools that may require educators to fulfill more than one role at a time, such as in the case of teaching principals (Clarke et al., 2006; Wildy & Clarke, 2008). It was also indicated across multiple studies that educators could benefit from training and learning experiences that encouraged better understanding of rural conditions, rural community histories and cultures, as well as socio-economic factors and delivery of culturally responsive pedagogy within these contexts (Ajayi, 2013; Harris, 2014; Wildy & Clark, 2012). Findings from within the literature indicate that increased exposure to rural communities and schools through practicum placements and coursework that includes practical experience within rural classrooms increased teachers' confidence and effectiveness within these contexts and has a positive relationship with their willingness to accept postings in rural communities (Wildy & Clark, 2012). As teacher attraction and retention remains a perennial problem for rural schools, investigating current pre-service and in-service training support produces some interesting insights as well as reveals areas in need of further investigation.

Pre-service training. Findings within the literature indicate that teacher education programs are often implicitly urban-centric as institutions are most often located within urban centers and students are infrequently exposed to rural communities or the alternative models of school arrangements found in rural schools such as multi-age classrooms (Ajayi, 2013; Trinidad, Sharplin, Ledger, & Broadly, 2014). One study asserted that teacher education programs

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prepared students for generic urban contexts and modes of curriculum delivery which left teachers ill-prepared to identify or address conditions or culture in rural communities (Ajayi, 2013). Without this sensitivity to the community context of their students' learning, the study found teachers were less effective in delivering learning that was linked to students' life experiences and social realities (Ajayi, 2013; Waller & Barrentine, 2015)

The link between understanding the context of rural schools within their communities as integral to teacher success and therefore student engagement and achievement was a finding across several studies (Ajayi, 2013; Waller & Barrantine, 2015). Implied within the literature, although not always directly discussed was that idea that teachers were often of a different cultural background and needed to cross one or more cultural boundaries when working within rural communities (Ajayi, 2013; Trinidad et al., 2014). One study investigated how to improve preparation of elementary English teachers for rural classrooms in southern California (Ajayi, 2013). Demographics were noted to include primarily Mexican-American families who frequently lived in multi-generational homes in communities with tight-knit social relationships (Ajayi, 2013). Findings showed positive implications in creating opportunities for pre-service teachers to teach lessons routinely within a rural school context (Ajayi, 2013). By employing a practice of critical reflection where lessons were taped and pre-service teachers prompted to respond to a series of questions, the program encouraged pre-service teachers to examine connections being made between the lessons and their students' lives, experiences, and socio-economic realities (Ajayi, 2013). Findings from this study showed that pre-service teachers gained a greater understanding of social, cultural, and economic realities of rural communities and felt their instruction was more effective after engaging in critical reflection process (Ajayi, 2013). The findings of this study were echoed by others that found placement in rural schools

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during practicums or coursework helped teachers gain confidence working in these settings (Ajayi, 2013; Azano, 2015; Kline et al., 2013; Trinidad, et al, 2014). Additionally, one Australian study found that 65% of participants that had participated in a rural practicum would consider taking a posting in a rural school (Kline et al., 2013) demonstrating that generally positive attitudes about rural schools are formed by supported training experiences within them (Kline et al., 2013).

In-service training. Investigation of the literature on training and professional development available to in-service teachers in rural schools produces a variety of insights. Primary is the concern that given the struggle of balancing multiple curriculums at various age levels as well as sometimes additional roles such as administrator or special education teacher, teachers may be managing many things but perhaps suffering from divided attention and lacking in specialized training. Findings from one study showed that rural teachers and principals often had skill sets perceived as wider than their urban peers by participants (Wallin & Reimer, 2008). These skill sets are developed by fulfilling multiple roles within the school due to scarcity of people managing and delivering education services (Glover et al., 2016; Wallin & Reimer, 2008). Findings were divisive with some participants taking a positive view and others indicating concerns that teachers taught multiple curriculums or taught outside of their area of expertise (Wallin & Reimer, 2008). Wallin and Reimer (2008) describe that access to professional development for teachers, particularly in areas of specialty such as English as a Second Language and supporting special needs was a growing concern of stakeholder groups in a rural Manitoba school district when considering student outcomes.

Additional findings within the literature demonstrated that participating in action research was an effective form of professional development for rural teachers (Portier & Stagg Peterson,

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2017; Stagg Peterson, 2012; Steele, 2013). Through engaging with action research, teachers are exposed to new practices and ideas and given the chance to evaluate their effectiveness with the partnership of a mentoring researcher (Portier & Stagg Peterson, 2017; Stagg Peterson, 2012; Steele, 2013; Waller & Barrantine, 2015). Several studies in the examined literature engaged in action research with teachers across rural schools in a number of subject areas. One study examined the effectiveness of an action research project around supporting development of primary students' oral language in Northern Ontario schools (Stagg Peterson, 2012). The study explored the effectiveness of action research as a method of remedying the "urban-rural gap" in rural teachers' access to resources, training, and expertise (Stagg Peterson, 2012, p. 1). Findings from the study demonstrated that participating in action research required teachers to engaged in "focused, systematic collection and analysis of data", resulting in improved understanding of assessment and development of analytical skills that participants found translated to other areas of practice outside of the study (Stagg Peterson, 2012 p. 9). Another notable finding was that teachers benefited from moving their professional knowledge and practice from intuitive to evidence based (Stagg Peterson, 2012). Other benefits included a greater sense of efficacy among teachers as they feel their ability to support students in their learning increases and increased collaboration with other teachers as well as researchers which results in sharing of ideas and experiences that builds practice and understanding (Portier & Stagg Peterson, 2017; Stagg Peterson, 2012; Steele, 2013).

Discussion. In summary, this review examines empirical literature which answers the question: Does current educator training and professional development support and prepare educators for rural educational practice? Findings indicate that pre-service training does exist within current teacher education programs in the form of specific coursework as well as

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placements in rural communities for practicums. Studies found that teachers benefited from supported exposure to rural teaching (Ajayi, 2013; Kline et al, 2013), developing positive attitudes toward rural teaching, confidence in working within the cultural context of these communities, and specific understandings of and skills in linking learning to the cultural, social, and economic realities of the rural communities within which they work (Ajayi, 2013; Kline et al., 2013). What is unclear in this examination of the literature is how comprehensive this type of programming is within teacher education programs across both Australia and Canada. The studies examined often worked with one institution and one cohort of teacher candidates, making it difficult to draw conclusions about how widely rural specific training might be offered across different institutions, how frequently it is offered, and how effective these programs are viewed over time. Further investigation into how effective rural schools and community perceive the training offered through these programs would be of interest as the studies examined only investigated impacts from the point of view of teacher candidates. Additional longitudinal investigations may also be of interest which may reveal if teacher candidates' perceptions of their preparation changed over time once taking a posting and how they remained. This may provide insight into the effectiveness of teacher preparation programs aimed at supporting rural schools as well as reveal areas of further need.

Literature on training and professional development offered to in-service rural educators is limited and sporadic. Findings often included that working within rural contexts makes professional development difficult as distance from urban centers forms a barrier for teachers accessing workshops and courses (Glover et al., 2016; Stagg Peterson, 2012; Wallin & Reimer, 2008). Of interest is the frequency of which action research taking place within the context of rural schools acts as a form of professional development as teachers are exposed to new practices

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and ideas and given the chance to evaluate their effectiveness (Portier & Stagg Peterson, 2017; Stagg Peterson, 2012; Steele, 2013; Waller & Barrantine, 2015). Action research is not systematically organized across regions, school districts, age levels or subjects of inquiry, meaning while an important feature of teacher professional development and academic inquiry into rural schools there is much yet to be uncovered. Further investigation into how links between researchers and teachers in rural schools can be fostered is worthy of more attention as two important outcomes results: professional development and improved practice of teachers within rural schools and the production of knowledge around teaching practices within the rural context.

Conclusion. In conclusion, the literature findings presented in this review indicates that small, rural schools are complex in their management and teaching practices, inclusive of problem solving around scarce resources, fulfilling multiple roles simultaneously (example: teaching and administration), and navigating the micro-politics of community as well as district or government policy (Ewington et al., 2008; Newton & Wallin, 2013; Wallin & Newton, 2014). Teachers and administrators could benefit from specialized supports that help them meet the particular needs and challenges of working in rural contexts. These supports take a number of shapes including specific training provided within pre-service teacher education programs. The literature frequently finds that attraction and retention of teachers to rural schools remains a challenge across both Canada and Australia (Barter, 2008). Teacher education programs frequently develop rural practicum placement and training programs specifically to meet this observed need (Kline et al., 2013). There is evidence in the literature that supports for in-service rural educators such as professional development opportunities are limited due to their remoteness from these services. A promising avenue for the continuing skill and knowledge

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development of rural educators investigated within the literature is their involvement as partners in action research. The examined studies indicated that this had a positive impact on a number of areas including sense of efficacy amongst participating teachers, teacher confidence and reducing sense of isolation from peers (Portier & Stagg Peterson, 2017; Stagg Peterson, 2012; Steele, 2013; Waller & Barrantine, 2015).

The following section will investigate this relationship between teaching practices in rural schools and student achievement using empirical evidence as support for answering the third research question: What is the impact of teaching practices in rural schools on student engagement and achievement?

Student achievement in rural schools

Introduction. A review of the empirical literature demonstrates that there is no clear consensus on how the features of rural teaching summarized earlier in this review impact student learning and achievement. While there are indications that the learning environments of students in rural schools are shaped by such features as teaching principals, multi-age classrooms, and the influence of small, tightly interconnected communities, there is no clear agreement as to the impact on student achievement. The literature does identify a rural-urban gap in student achievement measured in graduation rates, transition to post-secondary programs, and results of large scale literacy and numeracy assessments. However, the literature also finds that rural schools face challenges of access to resources and services as well as socio-economic demographics that indicate high levels of poverty and underemployment both of which influence student achievement (Harris, 2014; Portier & Stagg Peterson, 2017; Wallin & Reimer, 2008; Wilcox et al., 2014; Wildy & Clark, 2012). In the following section, this review examines empirical literature which answers the question: What is the impact of teaching practices in rural

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schools on student engagement and achievement? Findings are divided into two subsections (a) community context and (b) access to resources and services.

Review. In reviewing the empirical literature on student achievement in rural schools, it became clear that a common finding is that rural schools are inextricably linked to their environments. These environments exert influence on student achievement in a number of ways both inside and outside the context of the school. Several studies indicate that socio-economic factors such as high unemployment rates and high levels of poverty are evident in rural and remote communities across Canada and Australia (Harris, 2014; Portier & Stagg Peterson, 2017; Wallin & Reimer, 2008; Wilcox et al., 2014; Wildy & Clark, 2012). It is unclear whether student achievement is lower than urban peer groups in schools that demonstrate similar socio-economic demographics. As a result, no definitive conclusion can be made as to whether features of rural schools such as teaching principals as an instructional leadership model and multi-age classes are impacting student achievement in an ultimately positive or negative manner.

Anecdotal observations within findings of schools and classrooms tend to paint a positive picture of students engaging with learning in their rural contexts (Harris, 2014; Wallin & Newton, 2014). Data produced in government reports and some studies indicate continued gaps between rural and urban students in achievement measures such as graduation and transition to post-secondary programs (Canadian Council on Learning, 2006; Wilcox et al., 2014).

Community context. In examining student achievement in rural schools, findings within the literature indicate rural educators cannot lose sight of the context of their communities. Wildy and Clark (2012) discuss their investigation of several remote schools in Western Australia. They note that the schools are over 300 km from the nearest urban center, have no store and require people to drive extreme distances to obtain basic necessities such as groceries

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(Wildy & Clark, 2012). The schools also showed evidence of high levels of poverty, violence, and substance abuse within the communities (Wildy & Clark, 2012). The study made a delineation between schools that operated within a “culture of acceptance” of low student achievement and schools that operated with a “culture of inquiry” that sought to challenge ongoing practices within the school with eye to improvement of student learning (Wildy & Clark, 2012, p. 68). The study emphasized that leadership to address low student achievement in this kind of environment required specific “contextual literacy” that encompassed a familiarity with the “socio-economic, demographic, cultural, and historical composition of the community” combined with strategies informed by a school-level approach of gathering data on student achievement and progress (Wildy & Clark, 2012, p. 70).

The findings from this study found that it is imperative for school leaders and educators to appreciate the complexity of the community context when approaching student achievement. The study arrives at an important conclusion, asserting that rural schools should approach student achievement by gathering school level data, producing a school-based strategy for improvement, and measure and communicate improvements in a manner informed by their own goals (Wildy & Clark, 2012). This kind of study illustrates that for rural schools, school-based data and measurement strategies may be more effective windows into changes in student achievement than large scale assessments that often reflect regional data.

Access to resources and services. Several studies demonstrated findings that the context of rural communities as remote from resources and services impacted student achievement in both Canada and Australia (Wallin & Reimer, 2008; Wildy & Clark, 2012). Wallin & Reimer (2008) discuss findings that showed stakeholder groups in rural Manitoba school districts consistently noted lack of access to educational specialists was impacting student well-being on a

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number levels including academic achievement and mental health. Additionally, as noted in earlier sections of this review, rurality often proves to be a barrier in securing adequate in-service training for rural teachers in more specialized areas such as English language learning and behavioral support (Wallin & Reimer, 2008).

Access to specialized courses is limited within rural schools, particularly at a secondary level. While technology has made advances in this area as students and teachers can access courses not offered at their physical school through distributed learning programs, there is evidence that not all students have success in these online mediums. Barter (2008) found that while students in rural schools often had access to expanded course options through online or distance education, study participants noted that students often preferred direct and in person teacher contact and would either drop these courses or choose face to face classes in their place. Further investigation of the effectiveness of distributed learning in rural and remote contexts would form a valuable site of further inquiry as capacities for this continue to build with development in technology and yet continued to be informed by unique factors in rural environments such as limited or inconsistent access to internet and general attitudes such as preference for face to face learning experiences.

Discussion. A review of the empirical literature produces no definitive insights into student achievement in rural schools. Data within the literature is somewhat sporadic, often anecdotal, and how achievement is measured varies. Data on student achievement is often drawn from large-scale reports that tend to focus on student achievement through the lens of graduation rates, transition to post-secondary programming, and results from large-scale assessments in literacy and numeracy (Canadian Council on Learning, 2006; Portier & Stagg Peterson, 2017; Stockard, 2011; Shaienks & Gluszynski, 2007). Data from these sources is often regional in

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nature and does not examine specific schools. In school districts with a blend of urban and rural or remote schools, this means no clear picture of student achievement in individual rural schools can be ascertained (Stockard, 2011). The examined large-scale assessments also do not offer window into socio-economic or cultural factors which may impact student achievement viewed through these measures (Canadian Council on Learning, 2006; Portier & Stagg Peterson, 2017; Stockard, 2011; Shaienks & Gluszynski, 2007). More investigation into rural student achievement on all levels would afford a greater sense of understanding as to whether rural schools demonstrate lower achievement levels than their urban peers in schools and communities with similar socio-economic demographics.

Further investigation into how student achievement and learning is perceived students, teachers, parents, and communities would be of interest as it may reveal how communities feel their schools are or are not meeting the learning needs of their students. Only one study addressed student outcomes and perceived educational priorities across several stakeholder groups (Wallin & Reimer, 2008) which included community and parent groups. In addition, further investigation into the effectiveness of distributed learning both in online and off-line capacities may give further insight into how much this method of augmenting student learning is used by communities or rural schools themselves and to what degree it proves successful.

Conclusion. In summary, this review examines empirical literature which answers the question: What is the impact of teaching practices in rural schools on student engagement and achievement? No definitive answer can be reached. Studies that examine the teaching in a school based or classroom based capacity generally indicate positive affects from features of rural teaching practice such as multi-age programming and teaching principal instructional leadership models (Harris, 2014; Walling & Newton, 2014). However, many studies indicate ongoing gaps

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in student achievement between rural and urban students, although they primarily draw data on student achievement from large scale literacy and numeracy assessments as well as graduation and transition rates to post-secondary programs compiled in government reports (Canadian Council on Learning, 2006; Portier & Stagg Peterson, 2017; Stockard, 2011; Shaienks & Gluszynski, 2007). Findings indicate that the context of rural communities, including socio-economic factors and cultural differences inform student achievement (Wildy & Clark, 2012) and further investigation that accounts for these factors may be of value. Generally, there is a paucity of research on student achievement within rural schools and further investigation on a number of levels would be a of great benefit to our understanding of how rural schools meet student learning needs within the particular constraints and challenges of geographic distance from resources and services.

Summary of Findings

This literature review empirically answered three research questions: (1) Are there common features to teaching practices in rural schools? (2) Does current educator training and professional development support and prepare educators for rural education practice? (3) What is the impact of teaching practices in rural schools on student engagement and achievement? Findings indicate that rural schools do demonstrate common features that inform teaching practice such as teaching principals as a leadership model, multi-age classrooms, and the influence of community both on teachers and on the classrooms. As suggested by Harris (2014), rural schools offer the opportunity to investigate alternative models of school arrangement. Necessity, informed by such factors as remoteness from resources and services as well as small school size, creates innovation whereby alternative classroom configurations, delivery of

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curriculum through the lens of multi-age programming and close ties to influences of place, culture, and community are implemented.

In response to these unique attributes there is some evidence that specific training programs for rural educators at pre-service and in-service levels are beneficial both in attracting and retaining teachers to rural and remote posting as well as supporting new educators taking challenging postings in rural schools (Barter, 2008; Ajayi, 2013; Kline et al., 2013). Several universities have established rural training programs as a part of their teacher education programs which often include rural placement for teaching practicums and direct instruction to teacher candidates on the cultural differences they may encounter in rural teaching positions (Ajayi, 2013; Kline et al., 2013). Findings on professional development for in-service teachers in rural communities found that their geographic distance from urban centers formed a barrier to their continued development, particularly in specialized areas such as behavior support and English Language Learning.

To what degree student achievement is specifically impacted by features of rural teaching practice remains unclear in the literature. While findings indicate lower levels on student achievement on large-scale assessments, graduation rates, and transition (Canadian Council on Learning, 2006; Portier & Stagg Peterson, 2017; Stockard, 2011; Shaienks & Gluszynski, 2007), data that links student achievement to features such as multi-age classrooms is limited. Many of the studies examined commented positively on student learning in rural schools (Harris, 2014; Wallin & Newton, 2014; Wildy & Clark, 2012). However, the studies examined included data drawn from a small number of schools or classrooms and often focused on a highly specific region of Canada or Australia (Harris, 2014; Wallin & Newton, 2014; Wildy & Clark, 2012). This illustrates something of a disconnect between the large-scale data available on student

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achievement and the research being undertaken in rural schools. Further investigation into how rural schools measure, strategize, and implement change around student achievement would be a rich site of further inquiry.

Project Proposal

For the project component of my capstone, I am proposing the creation of a framework to implement supports for educators and administrators in rural schools within my school district as well as others. This framework is a response to some of the identified needs in the areas of professional development, isolation from professional peers, and lack of formal training for work in rural classrooms with the attendant challenges of multi-grade classrooms, fulfilling multiple roles, and limited access to supporting specialized services. The framework is responsive to many of the identified challenges faced by rural schools such as geographic distance from urban centers and supporting services, limited access to resources, small staffs and limited interaction with professional peers and professional development opportunities. It is also designed to support educators new to their roles as either a teacher or administrator. The framework has the following goals:

- Promote active professional learning networks between rurally placed teachers and administrators.
- Facilitate discussion around the positive practices within rural schools as well as the challenges being experienced.
- Facilitate on-going professional development through regular review of current research relevant to teaching practice in rural schools.
- Reduce sense of isolation from professional peers and provide opportunity for mentorship.

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The framework will offer an implementation plan for meeting the above goals. Primary, is the formation of a rural schools network to connect rural educators within the school district.

The network would have the following functions:

- Facilitating regular digital and physical meet-ups between rural educators and administrators within the school district in a number of formats and mediums (example: video-conferencing, professional development day sessions, book clubs, etc).
- Facilitating a peer mentor program to connect new teachers and administrators with more experienced peers in rural schools within the district.
- Facilitate discussion of recent research on teaching and leadership practices in rural schools.
- Facilitate professional development opportunities for rurally placed teachers and administrators by organizing workshops with rural schools in mind, both in topics and mode of delivery.
- Promote research on rural schools through participation in classroom or school-based action research and looking for partners in post-secondary institutions.

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Chapter 3: Capstone Project

Framework for Implementing Supports for Rural Educators

Background

I am proposing the creation of a framework to implement supports for teachers and administrators in rural schools within the school district where I work, School District 27 Cariboo-Chilcotin. There are eight schools considered rural or remote within the school district. They are geographically remote from each other with over 600 kilometers between the most eastern and most western schools. Most schools are over 100 kilometers from the nearest center of Williams Lake or 100 Mile House with roads greatly impacted by seasonal weather. In many cases, rurally placed educators may travel to urban centers once or twice a month, including trips for personal business such as groceries and appointments. Teachers and administrators also frequently live within the small communities they serve, often in school district provided accommodation as housing is limited within the communities. The communities themselves are small and primarily involved in ranching with populations spread out over a large geographic distance. Students travel in to their schools by bus from a distance of 20 minutes to an hour away. The eight rural and remote schools range in configurations from K-7 and K-10. They also range in size from 12 to 75 students with a correlated range in staffing from one to three teachers. All schools have teaching principals as part of their organizational structure. Teaching staff members or the principal also fill specialized roles such as English Language Learner teacher and Learning Support teacher as well as teacher librarian on top of their regular classroom instruction duties.

In my experience working within a rural school for the last four years, first as a new teacher and then as a new administrator, I have found there is very little in the way of supports

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for educators new to their roles. Many of the unique attributes of rural schools identified in the literature reviewed here have existed within the range of my own experience such as teaching within multi-grade classrooms, limited access to specialized services, and occupying multiple roles within the school such as my current role as teaching principal. With little formal training available specific to the demands of teaching and leadership within rural schools, there is a real need to support educators once they step into positions in rural schools. District professional development workshops are most often held in either Williams Lake and 100 Mile House. They do not always reflect the needs of rural teachers and administrators and can be difficult to attend during winter months. Due to their geographic remoteness from other schools, teachers and administrators are often isolated from professional peers for significant lengths of time which limits conversations around practice and sharing of ideas around challenges and successes within rural school contexts.

Along with the proposed framework I have developed a presentation that could be used to present the framework and its implementation plan that will be outlined below. I have included examples of slides I would use to present this information in my own district to an audience of my peers which would likely include other rural principals and district principals.

Rationale

A framework is necessary because there is currently an absence of formal strategies to support teachers and administrators in rural schools within the school district. These educators often have under five years experience in their position. They may be, like myself, both new to their professional role and the region, and thus do not have developed professional relationships to depend on and must contend with the added challenge of geographic isolation from professional peers when seeking to establish them.

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Teachers and administrators in School District 27 Cariboo Chilcotin encounter many of the features of rural schools identified within the literature including multi-grade classrooms, fulfilling multiple roles within a school, and the blurring of professional and personal lives that comes with living within small, geographically remote communities. Without support, these circumstances may lead to both isolation and burnout which may have negative impacts on their practice, personal lives, and ultimately their longevity in their roles within rural schools. In 2015, the school district published a document that outlined its strategic plan. Within that plan, the school district recognized the on-going need to support its rural schools, teachers, and students. In particular, the plan specifies as a goal “Our staff in rural and remote schools will receive support for teaching in multi-grade classrooms” (School District 27 Cariboo-Chilcotin, Strategic Plan 2016-2019, p. 5). This document demonstrates that the district recommends that specific supports are required to support teachers in rural classrooms within the district due in part to their multi-age configuration.

The following are identified needs from within the literature that also occur within School District 27 Cariboo-Chilcotin: (a) geographic isolation from professional peers; (b) lack of specific training in pre-service or in-service programs for teaching and leadership in rural schools; (c) limited access to specialized supports such as English Language learning or behaviour specialists. In response to these needs, the framework has the following goals: (1) promote active professional learning networks between rurally placed teachers and administrators; (2) facilitate discussion around the positive practices within rural schools as well as the challenges being experienced; (3) facilitate on-going professional development through regular review of current research relevant to teaching practice in rural schools; (4) reduce sense of isolation from professional peers and provide opportunity for mentorship. The following

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figure demonstrates how this would be presented. The goals are inter-related and any successful implementation would need to examine how support success in all goal areas.

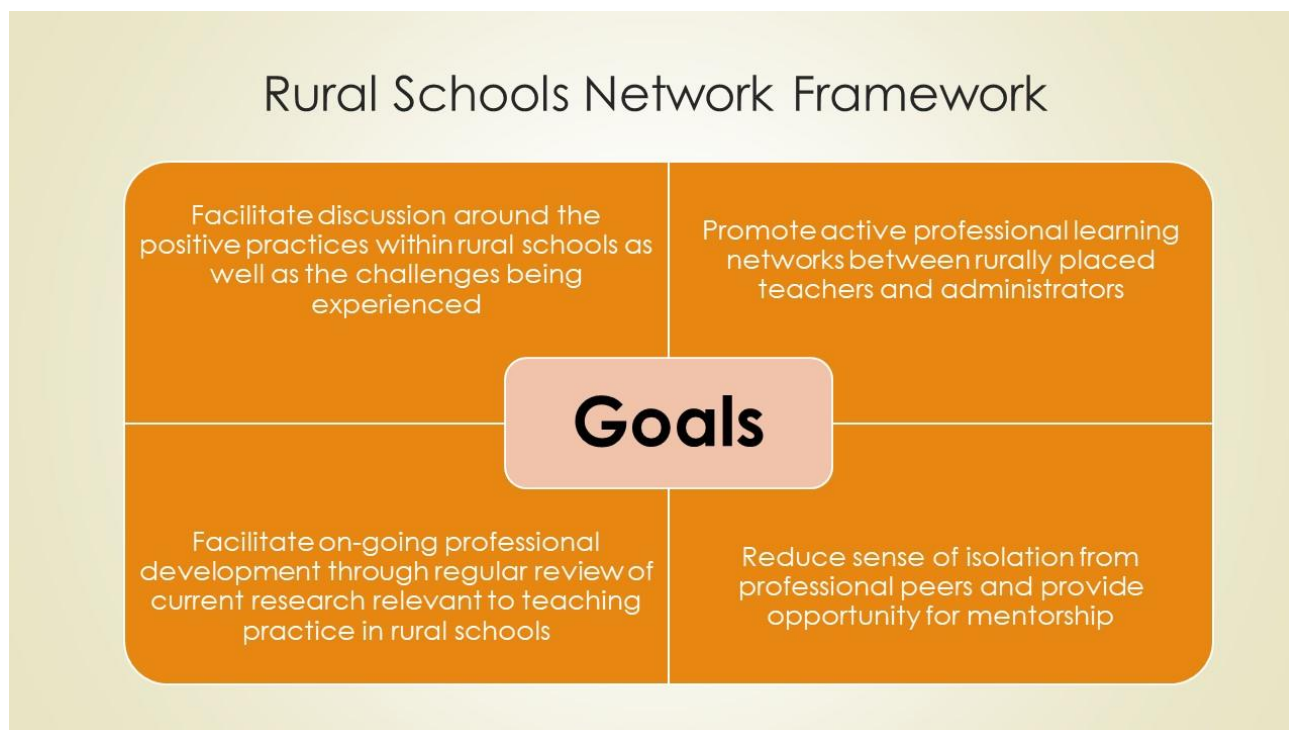


Figure 1. This example slide demonstrates how goals can be presented to an audience of stakeholders.

To meet these goals, I have developed a suggested implementation plan. The plan has at its foundation a development of a rural schools network at the district level. Currently, schools are organized based on region, and rural schools do not coordinate independently of schools in the centers of Williams Lake or 100 Mile House for professional development opportunities or curriculum implementation events. An organizational shift that seeks to connect rural schools together would bridge some of the isolation currently experienced by educators in rural schools who feel little connection to the needs, challenges, and opportunities currently shaped by the

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larger urban schools with which they are regionally connected for professional development opportunities.

In the sections to follow, I will discuss each of the stages in the implementation of a framework to support rural educators and administrators. (1) Stage One: Formation of a rural schools network with specific programming to meet identified needs. (2) Stage Two: Seek feedback from participants. (3) Stage Three: Evaluate whether needs are being met. (4) Stage Four: Implement changes and make adjustments. After stage four, the cycle is intended to return to stage one where any adjustments to programming that are judged necessary are implemented and programming once again moves forward to meet the needs of participants. Figure 2 demonstrates how implementation is designed to be an ongoing process, adaptive to the changing needs of participants over time.

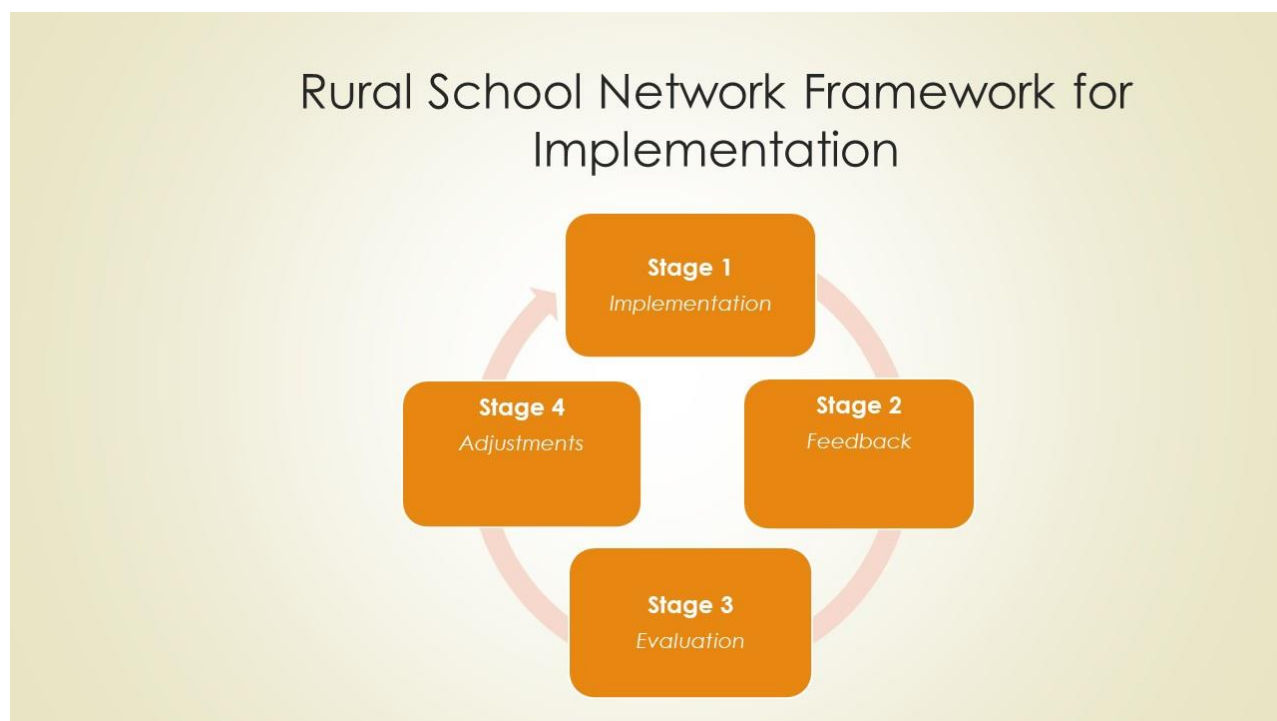


Figure 2. This example slide demonstrates the implementation cycle as an ongoing process.

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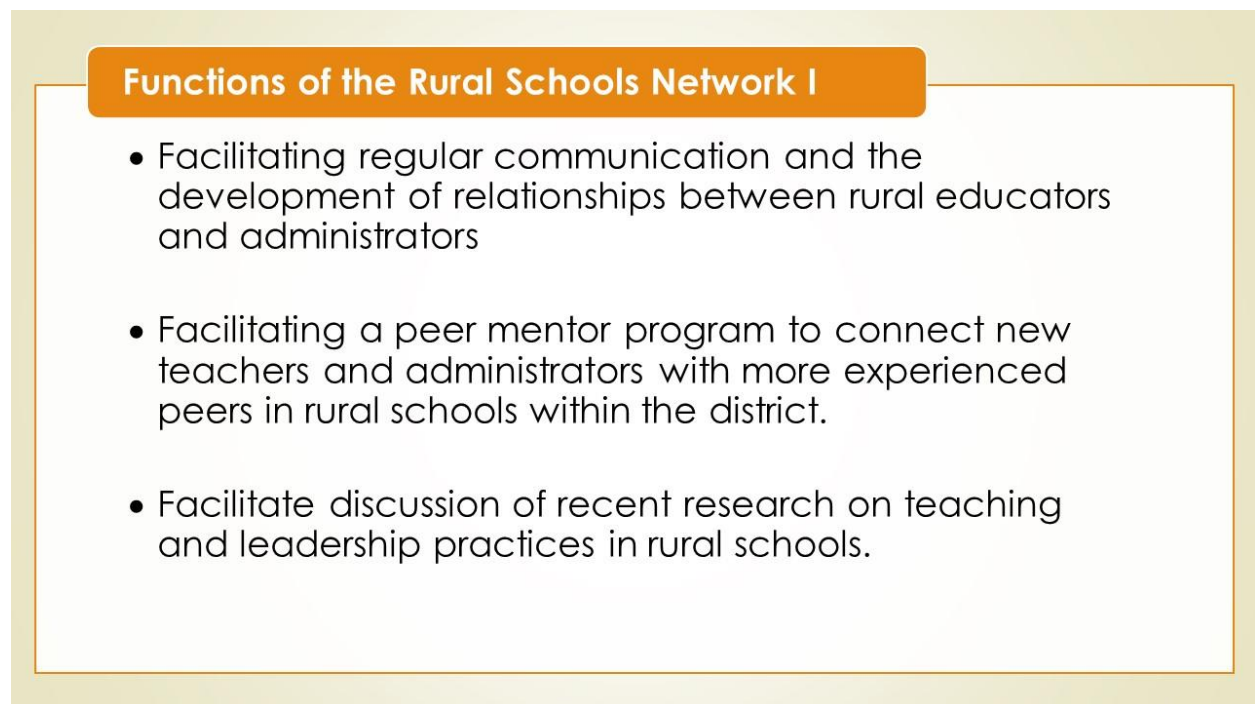
Stage One

Rural Schools Network. Connecting teachers and administrators working in similar circumstances is a necessary first step in meeting the goals of the framework. Reducing the professional isolation both felt and real of teachers and administrators in rural schools is the foundation on which the development of skills and fostering of improved teaching practices are built. As a rural educator, I experienced the difficulty of limited access to professional development opportunities. Sometimes those opportunities that can be accessed or are organized by the school district are a poor fit for the needs of the rural classroom and school I work within. In preparation for the literature review portion of this project, I often felt connection to the experiences of the educators I was reading about. Despite their diverse environments in other parts of Canada and in Australia I shared many of their experiences, challenges, and successes living and working in a rural community. With this sense of connection often came a sense of relief that I was not alone. I could see in the literature that others had experienced some of the same, sometimes difficult experiences that I do. These experiences are often shaped by those elements of rural teaching that make it unique such as limited resources, limited staffing, occupying multiple roles within a school, blurring of professional and personal lives and lack of experience in a role. Connecting educators that experience these scenarios is imperative to supporting them.

A rural schools network would operate with a specific mandate to support teaching practice in rural schools within the district. The network would have the functions: (i) Facilitating regular digital and physical connections between rural educators and administrators within the school district in a number of formats and mediums (example: video-conferencing, professional development day sessions, book clubs); (ii) Facilitating a peer mentor program to

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connect new teachers and administrators with more experienced peers in rural schools within the district; (iii) Facilitate discussion of recent research on teaching and leadership practices in rural schools; (iv) Facilitate professional development opportunities for rurally placed teachers and administrators by organizing workshops with rural schools in mind, both in topics and mode of delivery; (v) Promote research on rural schools through participation in classroom or school-based action research and looking for partners in post-secondary institutions.



The slide features a title box at the top left with the text 'Functions of the Rural Schools Network I'. Below the title, there is a list of three bullet points describing the network's functions.

- Facilitating regular communication and the development of relationships between rural educators and administrators
- Facilitating a peer mentor program to connect new teachers and administrators with more experienced peers in rural schools within the district.
- Facilitate discussion of recent research on teaching and leadership practices in rural schools.

Figure 3. This example slide demonstrates how the functions of the rural schools network programs could be presented to participants and stakeholders.

Functions of the Rural Schools Network II

- Facilitate professional development opportunities for rurally placed teachers and administrators by organizing workshops with rural schools in mind, both in topics and mode of delivery.
- Promote research on rural schools through participation in classroom or school-based action research and looking for partners in post-secondary institutions.

Figure 4. This example slide demonstrates how the functions of the rural schools network programs could be presented to participants and stakeholders.

The rural schools network is an organizational shift which seeks to connect rural schools together. This breaks from the existing trend where schools are individually connected to the larger schools in urban centers of which they may be feeder schools for students moving on to high school or the school district board office when administrators and teachers connect with upper management and itinerant specialists. Discussion around planning, services, and curriculum implementation tends to occur at a district wide level with little opportunity for rural schools to coalesce and discuss their specific environments and needs. While the school district does an adequate job of connecting with its rural schools, rural administrators, and rural teachers, it does not specifically seek to connect them together or provide opportunities for them to discuss rural needs and ideas.

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An important understanding of the proposed framework is that rural schools require specific programs to support them. As demonstrated in the above review of the literature, teaching practices in rural schools are influenced by some of their unique attributes including multi-age classrooms, teachers and administrators occupying multiple roles, and the blurring of professional and personal lives within the communities where they work. Connecting rural schools not only helps all involved better understand what teaching and leadership looks like in these schools, it also helps to better articulate what needs might arise and better define potential solutions through collective discussion. Sharing ideas, best practices, and challenges helps us better understand the big picture of what is happening within our rural schools. In the sections to follow, I will identify how the implementation of the rural schools network will meet the network's identified functions to form supports for educators in these environments.

As demonstrated in the literature, rural schools grapple with the following needs: (a) geographic isolation from professional peers; (b) lack of specific training in pre-service or in-service programs for teaching and leadership in rural schools; (c) limited access to specialized supports such as English Language learning or behaviour specialists. Utilizing technology, it is possible to reach out to rural educators where they are and shrink the barriers formed by geographic remoteness from one another. As a strategy, the framework relies on technology as a connective medium to bridge the gap of distance that is currently influencing the identified areas of needs. Instead of a barrier, geography becomes catalyst for innovation. The needs of rural educators can lead us to connect in new ways and think about how we approach the delivery of professional development and other supports to in-service teachers and administrators.

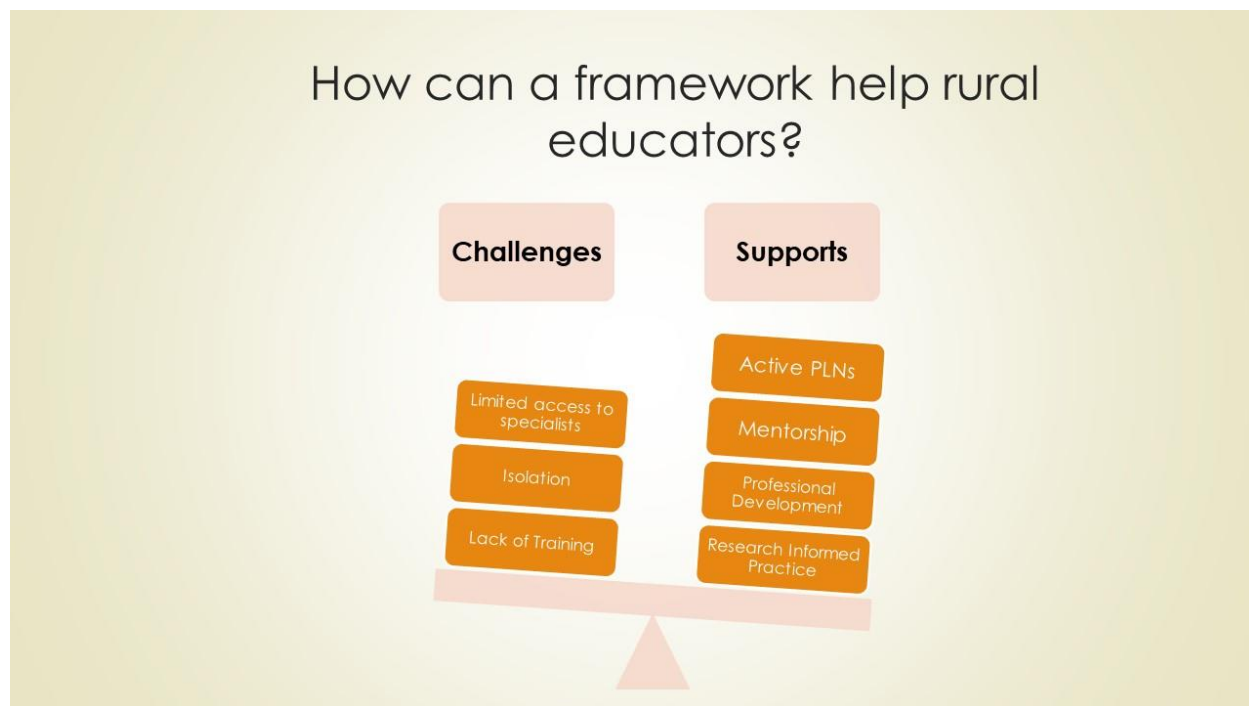


Figure 5. This example slide illustrates the balance of challenges faced by rurally placed teachers and principals and supports provided through the rural schools network framework.

Digital Connections. Technology offers many avenues to shrink the geographic distance between rural educators, help forge relationships, and make possible meaningful dialogue in an easy to access manner. Digital connections can be both formal and informal. Formalized connections may take the shape of meetings conducted via video conferencing technology. More informal connections might include utilizing social networking. Twitter chats, such as the weekly chat utilizing the #bced hosted by several educational leaders in British Columbia, have demonstrated that social media can be an effective tool to connect educators engage them in discussion. Other possibilities exist such as utilizing google docs to collaboratively look at documents or using other digital collaboration spaces to share pictures and documents that might reflect lessons, lesson plans, or learning experiences.

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As connection and communication form the foundation of the rural schools network framework and are the primary mechanism through which the framework will meet its goals, it is important that the forms and content of the digital connections be responsive to the needs of participants. Participants are more willing to engage with and sustain engagement over the school year with communication they find relevant and meaningful to their practice. The needs and interests of participants will be diverse and it is these that will help shape the mode and content of the digital connections. Allowing for formal and informal modes of connections helps provide the flexibility needed to make the experience successful for participants. However, all digital connection programs implemented should be evaluated by the following criteria to help them meet the goals of the rural schools network framework: Are they responsive to the needs of participants? Are they easy to access for a diverse group participants with differing levels of experience and comfort communicating in digital environments? Are they able to be documented in some way? How evaluation will be conducted through a participant feedback process will be covered in Stage 2 of the implementation framework.

In the following sections, I will propose several forms that digital connections can take as part of the rural schools network framework.

Peer Mentorship. Supporting new teachers and administrators in their positions is critical to their long-term success in their positions. As demonstrated in the literature reviewed above, teachers and principals in rural schools are often new to their role and new to the region in which they work. Rural schools within a school district usually have a wealth of experience within them, but it is poorly accessed by new teachers and administrators due the previously identified challenges posed by geography. As part of the rural schools network framework, teachers and administrators new to their roles should be partnered with a more experienced peer working

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within a rural school. The mentor-mentee relationship promotes connection and facilitates professional development through the sharing of ideas and experiences. While mentors and mentees may be geographically removed from one another, regular communication can be maintained through email, phone call, video conferencing and other modes. It has been my experience that rural educators are often very willing to support new people, especially those that demonstrate a willingness to live and work in rural communities. What is currently missing, is the mechanism to connect existing and new teachers and principals with one another.



Mentorship Program

Establishing peer mentor relationships among rural teachers and principals meets all four of the rural schools network framework goals:

- Promote active professional learning networks between rurally placed teachers and administrators
- Facilitate discussion around the positive practices within rural schools as well as the challenges being experienced
- Facilitate on-going professional development through regular review of current research relevant to teaching practice in rural schools
- Reduce sense of isolation from professional peers and provide opportunity for mentorship

Figure 6. This example slide illustrates how facilitating and promoting peer mentor relationships between new and existing professionals in rural schools helps meet all four of the rural schools network framework's goals

Setting up a mentorship program will require canvassing teachers and principals in rural schools in advance who would be willing to act as a mentor to a peer new in their position. A set

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of agreed upon guidelines for the mentor-mentee relationship would also have to be generated which should include a time-frame, frequency, and mode of meeting as well as descriptions of roles and responsibilities for mentor and mentee. These guidelines can be established through discussion amongst leaders in rural schools in the initial steps of implementation discussed below.

Professional Development. Embracing dialogue through digital mediums is a cornerstone of the rural schools network framework. As needs and interests are diverse not all administrators or teachers need been involved in the same discussions but groups should coalesce around a number of key interest areas. This can be ascertained through a survey of participants in the first few weeks of the school year. Questions should be formulated that ascertain what areas participants feel they need to develop their practice in to support teaching in rural classrooms. As people are more likely to participate in activities that they find to be both meaningful and relevant to their work, it is important for sustainability of any of the professional development programming that emerges from the rural schools network framework that it reflect and be responsive to the needs of participants.

Professional development opportunities developed through the rural schools network framework can take a number of forms. They mode and content will be shaped by participants. As participants are faced with significant geographical distance, communication will likely be primarily through digital modes. Participants may have variable backgrounds and comfort levels with connective digital mediums such as social media. Different modes of communication should be demonstrated to participants in a supported environment early in the implementation process so cohesive decisions can be made on how conversations will take place and be sustained. An initial workshop where participants are guided through a technology such as a

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twitter chat in a structured manner may help some with minimal experience see value or utility in modes they may be unfamiliar with.

Proposed suggestions for professional development programming through the rural schools network framework fall into two major categories: (a) ongoing digital discussions and (b) formal professional development workshops. Ongoing digital discussions could take the form of book clubs, twitter chats, or informal video conferencing to discuss a particular theme of interest to participants. These ongoing discussions will need to demonstrate consistency and continuity to be successful in supporting professional development. Assisting participants in setting up a schedule, deciding on topics of interest, and mode of communication will be an important element in initial implementation early in the school year. Formal professional development workshops refer to those opportunities such as workshops that are usually offered on professional development days. An objective of the framework would be to offer rurally placed teachers and principals one to two professional development workshops a year that reflect their unique challenges. Some of the identified areas of need include lack of training in teaching within multi-age classrooms as well as lack of access to supporting services or training in specialized areas like behaviour support or English language learning. It may be that these workshops reflect these needs or are informed by participant interest in other areas. The mode of delivery could be a traditional face to face workshops held on professional development days or could utilize video conferencing technology.



Figure 7. This example slide demonstrates the two main branches of professional development supported by the rural schools network framework.

Recent Research. Another aspect of meeting the framework’s goals to better support educators in rural schools is to facilitate engagement with current research on teaching practices in rural schools. This is closely linked to the above discussion on facilitating professional development amongst teachers and principals in rural schools. The literature suggests that teachers may encounter challenges to their practice for which they were not specifically trained such as multi-age classrooms and specialist roles within the school. Engaging with current research on teaching practices in rural schools gives rurally placed teachers an opportunity to grow and develop in needed areas of their practice. Teachers can be supported in this process by utilizing the ongoing digital discussions promoted through the framework. Through book clubs or discussions around recent research articles, teachers can engage with literature on rural

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teaching practice in a collaborative environment that promotes the sharing of ideas. This collaborative approach to professional development supports meeting the framework's goals of reducing isolation felt by rural educators while promoting engagement with current research and engaging in professional development.

Promote Research. As is in evidence in the review of the literature on teaching practices in rural schools, there is significant room for further exploration of the topic. Further research into numerous areas of inquiry in rural schools would benefit our understanding of teaching and leadership practices and their impact on student learning. As indicated in the review of the literature above, several studies demonstrated that rural teachers benefited from engaging with research. Positive impacts on teachers participating in action research studies include increased exposure to new ideas, increased self-perception of skill, and increased confidence in skills (Portier & Stagg Peterson, 2017; Stagg Peterson, 2012; Steele, 2013; Waller & Barrantine, 2015). Engaging in research as a participant not only gives rural teachers the opportunity to grow in skill, an increase in their sense of self-efficacy may contribute to feeling less over-whelmed by challenges they experience. It is likely this may have positive impacts on student learning and teacher retention in rural schools. The role of the rural schools network in promoting research is encourage schools, teachers, and principals to engage as participants with research when opportunities arise.

Implementation. As there is necessity that the content and mode of delivery be responsive to participant interest and need, it is imperative to seek this information from participants early in the process. Participants may have a diverse background and interest in use of digital communication. Leaders within rural schools must ascertain participants comfort level with technology and support initial implementation. A suggested timeline for implementation

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follows below with a recommended start date sometime between June to August of year prior to implementation. At this time, school leaders in rural schools meet and discuss identified needs of rurally placed educators and the process of implementation. This is an opportunity to discuss questions and concerns with school leaders and elicit feedback on the implementation plan before it is rolled out to teachers.

In September of the year of implementation, all participating rurally placed teachers and principals are surveyed for areas of interest. As discussed in the above section on professional development, the framework aims to meet the goal of facilitating development of teaching practice in rural schools through a collaborative method that connects rural educators together. Through recognizing that rural teaching may require different skills than teachers come equipped with, the framework hopes to offer professional development opportunities that reflect rural teachers' needs. A survey of participants is necessary to narrow focus and ensure programming is responsive to current needs.

On the first district professional development session of the year, generally held between late September and mid October, a face to face meeting of participating teachers and principals is held. The rural schools network framework promotes technology as a means of communication that is respectful of the geographic challenges faced by rural teachers. However, meeting initially in a face to face context allows teachers to explore technology that may be used throughout the implementation in a supported fashion. It also allows for participants to begin to establish relationships with one another which will be critical for the success of the programming to follow. For rural teachers who must travel to a meeting location, trips undertaken on professional development days are usually supported financially. Having the initial implementation meeting on a professional development day also provides the time for all staff to participate. In my own

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school district, it is often difficult for staff to leave for professional development opportunities during regular school days as they are most often not replaced by a Teacher Teaching on Call.

The aim of the initial implementation meeting is to familiarize participants with the goals of the framework; set areas of focus for professional development, familiarize participants with the technology to be used; and begin to foster relationships between participants. On the agenda for this meeting should be a discussion of the goals of the framework with the group. Survey results can be discussed and key areas of focus for professional development for the year decided on. Depending on group needs, participants may divide up into smaller groups around key interest areas or the group may engage as a whole on one or two themes. Participants should be walked through a model discussion utilizing some of the key connective technologies of suggested use such as video conferencing or twitter chats. Mock discussions could also model how teachers can use the discussions to engage with current research using a short piece of writing of relevance to the participants. A general schedule for future meetings should be developed with input from participants.

After the conclusion of the initial implementation meeting through to April ongoing professional development is undertaken by participants over the course of the school year. It will be composed of two major forms of professional development discussed in previous sections: ongoing discussions via digital connective technologies and formal professional development workshops held once or twice throughout the school year on district professional development days. A third form of professional development is possible for those participants participating in mentorship with another teacher. This is followed by stages Two through Four, discussed in detail in the following sections but include seeking feedback from participants, evaluating

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success of programming relative to the framework's goals and making any needed adjustments before the next cycle.

Stage Two

Feedback. In stage two of the implementation of the rural schools network framework occurring in May of the implementation year, feedback from participants will be elicited as part of the evaluation of the efficacy of the programming in regard to how well it helped meet the framework's overall goals. As discussed above this feedback, evaluation, and adjustment process forms Step Five of the implementation process. Feedback from participating rural teachers and principals will help to evaluate the programming's effectiveness and provide insights to make adjustments for the next school year and cycle of the framework implementations. Participants will have varied in their interaction with programming which may have included participation in the mentorship program, different forms of ongoing digital. Feedback will be elicited from participants that primarily concerns their self-perception of any impacts of participation in programming. Figure 8 and 9 demonstrate a possible form survey questions could take. Any questionnaire that strives to elicit participant feedback on how participation in the program impacted their practice in key areas which coincide with the outline goals of the framework would be appropriate.

Proposed Feedback Questionnaire

- 1. Describe what programs you participated in (circle applicable):
Mentorship Pro-D Workshop Ongoing Discussion Groups

- 2. Describe what technologies were used to support discussion:
Social Media Email Video Conferencing Other (describe) _____

- 3. How your communication with other teachers/principals changed as a result of participation?

- 4. How has engaging in the programs impacted your practice?

- 5. What were some strengths of the programs?

- 6. What are some areas that need improvement?

Figure 8. Proposed survey questions to gather feedback from participants.

Proposed Feedback Questionnaire

- 7. How applicable do you find professional development opportunities currently offered within the district to your needs?

- 8. Rate your sense of connection with other teachers prior to participating in the program.
1 2 3 4 5 (1= Low and 5= High)

- 9. Rate your sense of connection with other teachers after participating in the program.
1 2 3 4 5 (1= Low and 5= High)

- 10. How often did you engage with current research prior to participating in the program?
Never Rarely Sometimes Frequently

- 11. How often did you engage with current research while participating in the program?
Never Rarely Sometimes Frequently

Figure 9. Proposed survey questions to gather feedback from participants.

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Stage Three

Evaluation. In stage three of the implementation of the rural schools network framework, the efficacy of the programming will be evaluated about how well it helped meet the framework's overall goals. The programming will be evaluated based on the following two questions: (a) Did programming reduce impact of areas of need on educators throughout the school year? (b) How well did programming meet the framework's four goals? Feedback from surveys and ongoing dialogue with participants is primarily anecdotal, as participants will be asked to reflect on their own relationship with the programming. As the participation stage is formed through dialogue and relationships, so to the feedback and evaluation process in stages two and three should reflect this foundation. Discussion around the value of the programming may generate further ideas for development or identify other areas of need. A collaborative approach that values the insights of participants allows opportunity for adjustments to programming in the next cycle of implementation to be further informed by the on the ground experiences of rural teachers and principals.

Stage Four

Adjustments. In Stage Four, the process of feedback and evaluation may yield suggestions for new areas of focus for the next year or adjustments to how technology is implemented to support the framework's goals. Programming is meant to support rural teachers and principals, not form further barriers or increase workload. It is important that the implementation cycle be responsive to the participants needs in this regard. To what end the framework's goals or programming need to shift to respond to participants feedback should be a collaborative exploration at year end that sets the course for the next school year and next cycle of implementation. Building relationships and facilitating communication between rurally placed

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teachers and principals is at the foundation of the framework and technology is a means to support this end. Adjustments to the mode and frequency of communication may be of consideration at this point. Participants may also wish to re-survey their interests for the next school year to target new areas of practice.

Personnel and Participants

The implementation cycle involves some degree of facilitation and leadership. Especially in early stages, some promotion by school leaders is required to encourage participation and engagement amongst teaching staff. In the current district model for professional learning and development each school has a designated Professional Learning Communities (PLC) lead that assists school staff in collaboratively pursuing an area of inquiry related to their practice. In rural schools this role is generally held by the principal, but this is not always the case. There is also a district level PLC Coordinator position whose role includes facilitating PLCs at the school level. This position in coordination with the school-based PLC leads would be best situated to support the implementation of the rural schools network. Currently, schools operate their PLC in isolation. The rural schools network offers the opportunity to leverage existing organizational structures within the school district to better meet the needs of rural schools.

As rural schools often operate on the periphery of school district operations and represent small numbers of staff and students, their voice is small. By approaching professional development as a collective, rural educators are better able to articulate needs at a district level. The rural schools network framework provides the opportunity to pool resources, share ideas, and develop programming that meets rural needs at the source.

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Summary

The rural schools network framework is an answer to some of the identified needs currently experienced by rural teachers and principals. These needs are well documented with the literature reviewed above. In my own work within rural schools as both a teacher and a principal, I have also encountered these areas of need in my own school district, Cariboo-Chilcotin which features a number of geographically remote schools. These needs include: (a) geographic isolation from professional peers; (b) lack of specific training in pre-service or in-service programs for teaching and leadership in rural schools; (c) limited access to specialized supports such as English Language learning or behaviour specialists.

The goals of the rural schools network framework developed in response to these needs: (1) Promote active professional learning networks between rurally placed teachers and administrators; (2) Facilitate discussion around the positive practices within rural schools as well as the challenges being experienced; (3) Facilitate on-going professional development through regular review of current research relevant to teaching practice in rural schools; (4) Reduce sense of isolation from professional peers and provide opportunity for mentorship. These goals are met through a focus in promoting building relationships and communication between rural teachers and principals with the aim of increasing participation in idea sharing. Specific professional development supports are suggested that promote collaborative growth.

The suggested professional development programs facilitated through the framework are a mentorship program that pairs new rural teachers with more experienced peers; formal professional development workshops that reflect rural learning needs; and informal ongoing digital discussions around key areas of needed skill development identified by participants. These programs are rolled out in a four-stage implementation plan. In Stage One, participants are

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introduced to the framework's goals, a survey of participants to ascertain areas of need is performed, key areas for professional development focus are selected and digital modes of delivery discussed, and finally participants begin engaging with both material and each other in regular digital communications. Formalized professional development workshops may also occur during this stage. Topics of these professional development workshops should be directly linked to the areas of need identified by the participating rural teachers and principals in the initial survey. In stage two, occurring late in the school year, feedback is sought from participants to ascertain how well programming met established need. In stage three, this feedback is used to evaluate how well programming met the framework's goals and any changes or adjustments for the next cycle are recommended in stage four, occurring typically at the end of the school year.

Rural schools through the nature of the landscape they occupy, offer an opportunity to innovate. A common thread for many who work and live in rural communities is the knowledge that to move forward you must work together with what you have. The framework discussed above and its implementation plan leverages what rural schools and communities do best, pool resources, share ideas, and help each other through adversity. The strength of rural teaching lies in this value that relationships are fundamental to learning and living. Working from this strength, the rural schools framework offers an opportunity to better support teachers and principals who may be vulnerable to the challenges their roles bring. In remaining responsive to the needs of front line staff, the framework aims to utilize the insight of participants into their own practice and needs to implement supports with the best fit possible.

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