

SUSTAINING CONVERSATIONS FOR RURAL NORTH DAKOTA LANGUAGE ARTS
TEACHERS

A Paper
Submitted to the Graduate Faculty
of the
North Dakota State University
of Agriculture and Applied Science

By
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In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of
MASTER OF ARTS

Major Department:
English
Option:
Composition

April 2016

Fargo, North Dakota

North Dakota State University
Graduate School

Title

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The Supervisory Committee certifies that this *disquisition* complies with North Dakota State University's regulations and meets the accepted standards for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explores the role conversation plays in sustaining rural North Dakota Language Arts teachers. This study examines the questions: What conversations are sustained rural North Dakota Language Arts teachers engaging in? and What role does conversation play in sustaining rural North Dakota Language Arts teachers? Six rural Language Arts teachers were interviewed about their experiences with conversation using the framework of the three different discourse communities as proposed by Australian researchers Tytler et al. for rural professional development: the local school community, the local community, and the subject-matter community. Tytler et al.'s framework was productive in this study to understand what conversations these six teachers were engaged in. However, as these conversations played a role in connecting these six teachers intellectually, emotionally, and locally, it emerged as helpful to think of a teacher as a person who is connected to three different communities for intellectual and emotional support.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A writer never writes alone. I am grateful for all those conversations that have centered around learning and teaching. I am thankful for the many Communities of Truth I have been privileged to be a part of. This has been an inspiring conversation with both students and teachers alike. All of your names would fill more pages than I am allotted and many of you would be too humble to admit your inspirational role. However, I would like to acknowledge specifically the encouraging community that the North Dakota State University English Department has been in thinking through ideas and implementing into them into action: both in the air and on the page. Thus, I am left to simply say: you know who you are, and to you, thank you.

“The joy of the LORD is your strength.” –Nehemiah 8:10b

“Laughter is the sun that drives winter from the human face.” –Victor Hugo

DEDICATION

For my mother, who first invited me into the world of teacher conversations.

For my father, who both taught me and reminds me how to laugh.

For my siblings, who help me see the world from outside of an educational lens.

For my teacher friends, who listen and share, helping to make sense of this crazy journey.

For my friends, who have encouraged me to be a finisher.

For my students, for inspiring me to be more creative and thoughtful.

For these teachers, who shared their teaching conversation experience with others.

For those students and teachers here and yet to come, who will explore the world and all of its

Great Things.

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CHAPTER ONE. INTRODUCTION

My experience at graduate school began with the concept of conversation. During the first week of graduate school in teaching assistant training, I encountered rhetorician Kenneth Burke's famous parlor metaphor that frames research as an ongoing conversation. This metaphor not only shaped how I saw my research as a graduate student, but my practices as a teacher. I valued conversation even more in my classroom and shared this metaphor with my students so that they too could situate their research as part of a conversation. Additionally, I found myself in a new teaching position: teaching the same college composition course as my graduate school cohort and able to talk extensively about teaching and classes in the graduate offices. I did not have my own classroom where I could shut the door and my desk was in a hallway with two other graduate students and many visitors. I found myself enjoying this flow of conversation. This experience with conversation in graduate school also gave me a framework to think about my four years spent teaching Language Arts in rural North Dakota.

My North Dakota teaching story began first as a student in rural North Dakota. I grew up in a rural western North Dakota town the daughter of a school board member who was also a former elementary and hearing-impaired educator. Thus, I listened to and sometimes participated in many conversations about education long before I knew that was to be my path. Growing up, I remember my father, who is not a teacher, saying many times that whenever my mom was with other teachers socially they were always "talking shop."

In reflecting on my teaching experience, my first three years of teaching mainly seventh and eighth grade Language Arts in western rural North Dakota held an unexpected gift of conversation: I was roommates with a fellow first-year Language Arts teacher who taught in a different school district. We joked that we had our own personal professional learning

community (PLC). Although we joked about it, I do not know if I would have had such a good experience if not for the rich conversations with a fellow new teacher and friend. We ended up taking the Northern Plains Writing Project Summer Institute after our second year of teaching and discovered a rich conversation not just within the institute, but also in the professional resources in books. Also, I found excellent teaching conversations in an unexpected place: coaching extracurricular activities. My fellow junior high girls basketball coach had many years of experience in the community and teaching elementary P.E.; thus, in the midst of planning basketball practice we talked about the teaching life, specific to the local school community and small towns. Additionally, coaching speech brought a variety of teachers and coaches together on most Saturdays from January to April, and I became part of informal, sustaining conversations there. Despite not having any experience with drama, I ended up assisting and then directing a play. This led to co-facilitating drama camp for two summers and that connected me with the local arts council as they sponsored it. My final year in rural North Dakota I lived by myself, without the consistent informal PLC with my former roommate, and I realized even deeper what a valuable conversation that had been, both intellectually and emotionally.

Thus, my time learning, reflecting, and participating in conversations in graduate school left me wondering what conversations are rural North Dakota Language Arts teachers having and what role do those conversations play in sustaining their teaching careers? I am interested in rural North Dakota Language Arts teachers not simply because I was one and want to understand the phenomenon of rural North Dakota Language Arts teacher conversations beyond my experience, but also because the reality of North Dakota is that of many rural schools and they can potentially be seen as places of isolation.

Rural is a term that is difficult to define. In a study of digital literacy in rural women's lives, Vaughn, Harrel and Dayton note that "determinations about what counts as 'rural' are often rhetorical, made for particular purposes and contexts" (28). Cromartie and Bucholtz note over 12 different federal rural definitions, making researchers and policymakers left to decide which definition best fits their project (29). Thus, locally in North Dakota, I turn to a definition that is often associated with rural secondary schools by those who live in rural areas: "Class B." This is a term inherently tied to school activities as it originates from the school classification system used by the North Dakota High School Activities Association (NDHSAA). In the NDHSAA bylaws, Class A is a high school with a "total enrollment of 325 or over" or a school that volunteers to be Class A, and Class B is defined by *not* being Class A (North Dakota High School 2). While a few private schools in larger North Dakota towns are Class B, I focus this project on the secondary Language Arts teachers who teach in rural areas in these Class B, smaller schools. These rural Class B schools have a high school enrollment of less than 325 and are more isolated from the larger towns that in North Dakota are marked by larger schools with more diverse course offerings, facilities, better access to resources (e.g. more shopping) and stoplights. These rural schools usually have an English department ranging from one to three teachers.

In reading some of the scholarship about rural education and professional teaching conversations, I realized that rural is a simple term for a diverse world and that rural is often defined by its lack or in contrast to urban. To counteract the "lack" rhetoric, Donehower, Hogg and Schell propose to think of rural in terms of "sustainability" (4). Since rural is so diverse and there is a general lack of rural voices in the scholarship, rural education and literacy researchers are calling for more rural literacy and education research. In the scholarship, I also found

advocacy for teacher-led conversations and themes of focusing on conversations that were voluntary, contained deeper content, were sustained, and often led to friendship.

For this project, I thought in terms of “sustaining” for several reasons. The idea of sustainability emerged in both the scholarship for rural literacy and for teacher conversations. However, even more formative in my thinking is the idea of sustainability as a counter-narrative to the often-told story of teacher burnout. The language surrounding first year teachers is not of “sustaining,” but often that of survival. Richard Ingersoll, educational researcher, highlights this survival rhetoric surrounding new teachers: “lost at sea,” “sink or swim,” “trial by fire,” and even a profession that “cannibalizes its young” (47). Ingersoll reported that his and other studies have shown that 40% to 50% of teachers exit the profession within five years (49). While teachers leave the classroom for many reasons, burnout is an often talked of word. Anthony Dworkin, a sociologist who has studied teacher burnout, notes two burnout factors for teachers: finding too much identity in one’s work and structural isolation. Although teachers interact with students all day, teaching can be an isolating profession. John I. Goodlad, former co-director of the Center for Educational Renewal, uses the metaphor of “classroom boxes” (573). Ingersoll also highlights isolation from colleagues (47), and Parker Palmer calls for teachers to be participating “in a community of pedagogical discourse” as the “privatization of teaching” limits teachers individually and “fosters institutional incompetence as well” (144).

Overcoming isolation is important because the two burnout factors of structural isolation and too much identity in one’s work are quite often associated with teaching. This isolation might be exacerbated in a rural North Dakota setting. This is because in rural North Dakota teachers are often publically known as teachers to most of the community (identity) and there is not as an extensive of a professional community to turn to due to the size of the school

(isolation). I chose to focus on the phenomenon of conversation as a way to study the idea of teacher sustainability because isolation and conversation can be seen as opposites. I acknowledge that simply having a conversation does not quell isolation as sometimes the wrong or destructive conversations, such as gossip, can actually make people feel more isolated. However, since conversation can be a place where knowledge is shared, connections made, and isolation lessened, this project seeks to understand what conversations and what role conversation plays in sustaining six rural North Dakota Language Arts teachers who have moved beyond their first five years of teaching. Specifically, the research questions are as follows:

1. What conversations are sustained rural North Dakota Language Arts teachers engaging in?
2. What role does conversation play in sustaining rural North Dakota Language Arts teachers?

For the purposes of this study, I define a sustained teacher as one who has not only been teaching for six years, but someone who has been engaged with the profession and is still learning. I chose to use the term “sustained” instead of “veteran” because the idea behind sustained is more of an active process rather than being defined by years of experience. I define conversation as an exchange of ideas, either verbally or in writing. In learning from these six experienced, sustained teachers, I hope that these shared conversation experiences and lived wisdom can serve as a valuable resource for those people whose story includes teaching, especially teaching in rural North Dakota. The results of the study could potentially have implications for professional development and preparation of teachers for rural communities. This is especially important in the current young teaching environment of North Dakota. Laurie Stenehjem, North Dakota Teacher Support System Coordinator, compiled the North Dakota

Department of Public Instructions MIS03 numbers and found that as of 2015, North Dakota had more teachers with 1-8 years of experience than those with over 10 years of classroom experience. A “changing of the guard” is occurring and it is wise to balance new strategies with time-tested ones.

In Chapter 2, I review the literature pertinent to the phenomenon of sustained rural North Dakota Language Arts teacher conversations. I first look at rural professional development, rural education, conversation, and teacher professional talk, both face-to-face and online. In Chapter 3, I detail my methods of qualitative interviewing. Chapter 4 contains the results and discussion of the answer to the first research question about what conversations these six teachers are engaging in. Subsequently, Chapter 5 contains the results and discussion of the role these conversations play in sustaining the teachers. I conclude in Chapter 6 by discussing my contribution to the scholarship and implications of the research.

CHAPTER TWO. LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature informing this project comes from the realms of rural teacher professional development, rural education, conversation, and teacher professional talk.

The article that framed and guided my research comes from a study of rural Australian teacher professional development. Tytler et al. interviewed math and science teachers from several rural Australian schools in order to investigate “how these issues of generic versus subject-specific teacher knowledge play out in the context of rural schools” (872). They were interested in subject-specific professional development because they noted “a major identity commitment for secondary teachers is to their subject specialism” (877). They found that the rural teachers “took substantial responsibility for aspects of their own PD” (876) and that secondary—as opposed to elementary—subject-specific teachers moved beyond their schools for advice and that conference was an important professional time (876). Out of their research, they developed a framework (see fig. 1) and noted that its essential point is that teachers need to be active in all three discourse communities to not just “function effectively” but also “grow professionally” (877). Ultimately Tytler et al. argue for the concept of “discourse community” over “community of practice” because “the focus is on the shared genres and lexis which enable effective community within the community rather than on a shared focus or task” (878). While they acknowledge that this study was conducted in a specific cultural context—that of rural Australia—they “suspect” that their findings “will hold true much more generally” (878).

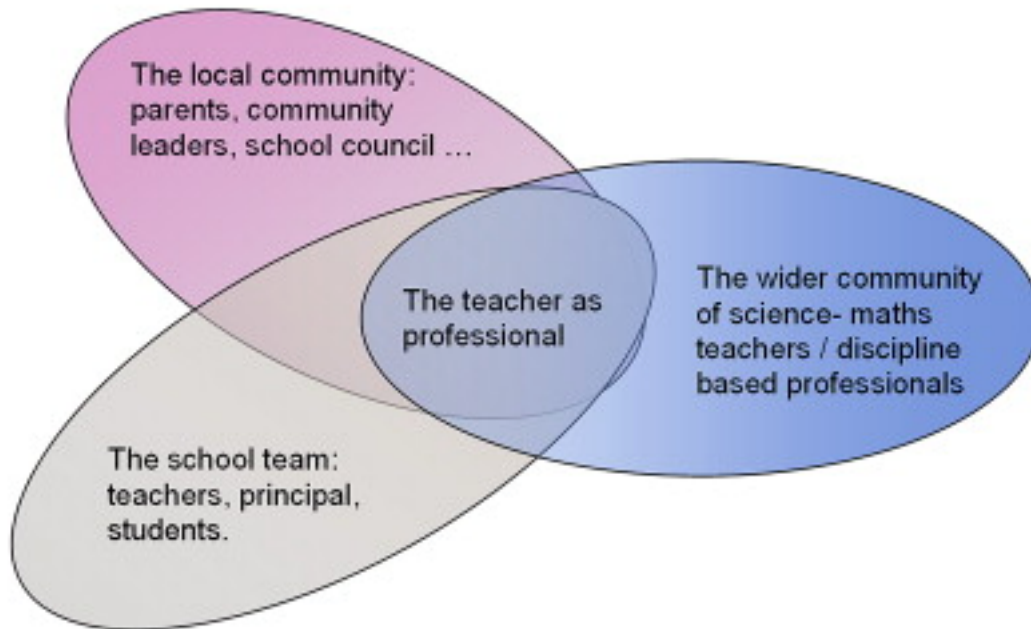


Figure 1: "Teacher professional learning discourse communities" (Tytler et al. 878)

The Australian researchers posited that rural Australian teachers' involvement in the subject-matter discourse community would be the most challenging and that schools and professional organizations should help think creatively as to how to reach these rural schools (878-9). I found this framework both simple and helpful to think about rural teachers. Thus, in thinking in the cultural context of rural North Dakota, I used this framework to partly guide my interview questions and analysis in order to see if these findings would hold true for rural North Dakota Language Arts teachers. I wanted to see if this framework would transfer to other cultural settings and subject-matter experts.

While Tytler et al. expresses concern about rural teachers not being connected enough to professional development specific to their subject-matter, Morrison—also researching in rural Australia—focuses on interpersonal relationships for new teachers within their rural school community. Morrison acknowledges the emotional aspect of teaching and the challenge of stepping into a teaching role with high expectations (121). He found that if interpersonal

relationships were lacking, new teachers questioned their competency as the interpersonal relationships “conveyed deep meaning to the early career teachers about their place within the school and the profession more generally” (122). Morrison worries that new teachers are not given enough support for the transition to teacher by their preparatory universities and current employers (131). While new teachers might be isolated from relationships, Appleton counteracts the notion of rural as isolated, by noting that it is the “perception of isolation” not the actual isolation that makes one feel more isolated (6) and has evidence that rural teachers can connect with mentors and the school well (7). As I investigate the role of conversation in sustaining rural teachers, conversation may play a role in connecting teachers to their local community and subject-matter community and reducing the isolation that is often perceived when thinking of rural schools.

Several scholars are also interested in the perception of rural. Donehower, Hogg, and Schell; Burton, Brown, and Johnson; and Corbett have noted that rural is often defined in negative terms, by its lack or its contrast to urban. Burton, Brown, and Johnson’s narrative analysis of the story the rural education research has told from the 1970s to 2013 uncovered four general themes: professional isolation, difference from urban teachers, lack of professional credentials or expertise, and resistance to change (4). They discovered that the research often presents the rural story as a “problem”, but it also can be portrayed as too romanticized (8). They call for more narratives to more thoroughly understand the complexities of rural education as it is a diverse field (9). Donehower, Hogg, and Schell also call for more rural literacy research as they noted that “literacy research in our field is skewed toward urban sites and subjects” (12). By interviewing six rural teachers about their experiences with conversation, I will be adding more rural voices to expand our understanding of the profession beyond urban sites.

As I research what conversations teachers are participating in, understanding what role the conversations may play in sustaining them is important. Donehower, Hogg, and Schell propose to think of rural in terms of “sustainability” instead of lack (4). Sustainability for them is not “preserving,” which “suggests locking cultural practices into the past, implying passivity rather than active and relevant contributions to culture. Sustainability requires adapting cultural practices to changing economic, ecological, political, and social circumstances to ensure the survival and sustainable development of a community” (20). They additionally note that sustainability is also not simply “modernizing” by “bringing [the rural population] into line with the technological, economic, and cultural systems of urban life” (27). Donehower, Hogg, and Schell propose that rural literacy should not be thought of in isolation, but instead as “collaborative literate action” (xii-xiii). They envision this collaboration amongst “a variety of stakeholders, rural, urban, and suburban, on issues of common concern such as sustainable systems of education, economic development, and environmental policies” (xii). Sustainability will take collaboration and that can partially be found in conversation.

Rhetorician Kenneth Bruffee notes the connection between conversation and collaboration:

To think well as individuals we must learn to think well collectively—that is, we must learn to converse well. The first steps to learning to think better, therefore, are learning to converse better and learning to establish and maintain the sorts of social context, the sorts of community life, that foster the sorts of conversation members of the community value. (401)

Bruffee puts this conversation in terms of community, and rhetorician Karen Burke LeFevre in *Invention as a Social Act* argues that invention happens when the individual and the social are

“dialectically connected,” in other words, in conversation together (37). Rhetorician Krista Ratcliffe also links a component of conversation as a source of invention: rhetorical listening. For Ratcliffe, rhetorical listening can be applied for two specific instances: invention and cross-cultural communication (1). Ratcliffe’s emphasis on listening sets a tone of respect for conversations. Parker Palmer theorizes learning as a community of truth that relies on deep, honest conversations to know the subject at the center of the community, requiring “complex patterns of communication—sharing observations and interpretations, correcting and complementing each other, torn by conflict in this moment and joined by consensus in the next” and “conflict, not competition” (103). Sherry Turkle, MIT technology and society professor, argues that face-to-face conversation “is the most human— and humanizing— thing we do” and it promotes listening, “empathy”, understanding, and “self-reflection” (3).

Conversation can be a place of invention, but it can also be a place of empty talk. Thus, for my study, I don’t wish to simply understand what conversations the teachers engage in as not all conversations may carry the same depth and meaning for sustaining. This is why I also wish to explore the role conversations play in sustaining teachers. This is especially intriguing as Kevin Brooks notes that silence—tied to geography or ethnic background—is a “dominant linguistic feature” of the Great Plains region of which North Dakota is a part (63). Brooks additionally notes, “Talk, storytelling, even gossip have increasingly been acknowledged as powerful means of attaining self-knowledge and a sense of community identity” (69). This sense of community identity is often important in rural North Dakota.

Scholarship on teacher conversations not inherently tied to place clearly note conversation’s importance. Researchers are concerned not simply that spaces for conversation are available, but about the quality of the conversation and what makes the conversations

valuable and sustainable. Clark and Florio-Ruane advocate that teacher-led conversation groups—which they find work best if they are regular, voluntary, and composed of six to ten teachers—are sites of sustainable, valuable and inexpensive professional development (6). They also claim that the conversations are best if designed “to pose and pursue teaching problems together, and provide intellectual and moral support to one another” (6). Cavazos, in her study of a voluntary all-female conversation group of science educators, also notes the move from profession to the personal and the individual to the group. Rust and Orland report that a sustained conversation, which requires time and continuity (113), allows an “individual narrative” to become a “shared conversation” (114). The idea of these teachers becoming friends was also found in Rust and Orland and Cavazos.

Zellermayer notes that this shift of teacher responsibility to engage in conversation as professional development can be more difficult than it seems as an obstacle to overcome is the consumerist professional development mindset of teachers “acting merely as consumers” (41). Holmlund Nelson et al. also call for teacher-leaders to take responsibility to engage in deep, riskier conversation (178). Susan Florio-Ruane and Taffy E. Raphael with the assistance of the Teachers Learning Collaborative explored teacher study groups that met to discuss culture, education, and identity. They explored the meaning of “sustainable” in them (65), finding that over the course of time, the teachers stepped into more leadership roles in the conversations (78). They noted that in the sustained group, these teachers had “an energy” and desire to use what they were learning about themselves in relation to culture to their teaching. Florio-Ruane and Raphael observed that in these sustained groups, the goals were flexible, and even though the participants cycled through, “the evolving practices and knowledge of the group continue[d] to be invoked” (76). They point to the nature of the study group’s topic of culture as an advantage:

in discussing culture, it became “possible for difference to be identified and for conversations in, through, and about difference to unfold” (76). They found this significant in “a profession that remains primarily Caucasian, English-speaking, female, and middle income” (76). The majority of North Dakota Language Arts teachers also match the homogeneity of this profession, as do the six participants of this study.

Scholarship for rural professional development, which is part of the conversation with the subject-matter community, identifies online connections as a potential avenue for helping teachers grow professionally. Online conversations open up the possibilities of overcoming the obstacles of distance and time—two components that are perhaps more challenging for rural North Dakota Language Arts teachers. McLean, Verenikina, and Dixon created and studied the use of an online space to help Australian special education teachers in isolated settings gain access to resources, expert help, and each other. They found that the online space helped the teachers, but there is “not a single solution, but a combination of solutions” to help teachers professionally (29). Hunt-Barron et al. examined a local National Writing Project Site that used a combination of face-to-face professional development with the use of blogs. The teachers used the blogs mainly to access resources (consume) and not to share their journeys (produce). The main obstacles for teachers were time, technology access, and reluctance to share publicly (10-11). Hur and Brush examined why K-12 teachers voluntarily participate in online communities in order to see if professional development could be adapted to better meet teacher’s self-expressed needs. They found five motivating reasons for teachers to engage online: “sharing emotions,” “utilizing the advantages of online environments,” “combating teacher isolation,” “exploring ideas,” and “experiencing a sense of camaraderie” (290-291). In interviewing teachers, I defined conversation at the beginning as online or face-to-face. I made sure to ask them about their

online teaching conversations—either those they participate in or those they just listen to in order to understand if they were seeking out teaching conversations online as a way to be sustained.

The scholarship on professional conversations focused on professional and personal conversations with peers; however, teachers often network beyond peers. Students are also part of the conversation. Tytler et al. includes students in the discourse community of the local school, and Kira Baker-Doyle considers students to be “Diverse Professional Allies” (64). Baker-Doyle thinks of teacher connection as networks—not conversations—and argues that cultivating both professional and personal support networks are vital skills for pre-service and new teachers to learn in order to succeed in the profession (6). Baker-Doyle mapped the experience of four new teachers in an urban setting and advocates for new teachers to map their teaching networks as well. Baker-Doyle emphasizes the need for teachers to be able to navigate not just the subject-matter conversations, but also—in alignment with Morrison’s emphasis on interpersonal relationships—to find the support within the school because “the school policies and culture are important factors in shaping a new teacher’s support network” (7). She calls for teachers to seek an “Intentional Professional Network” to help with professional issues (22) and “Diverse Professional Allies” of “parents, students, and community members” who keep the focus on the students and “help teachers to think innovatively” (64). To establish these allies, she recommends teachers seek out “boundary crossers,” those people who have “a foot in both the school and community, and are willing to help the teacher make connections with parents and community members” (76). Baker-Doyle also advocates for a simple strategy: new teachers asking for help when needed (76-77). The idea of seeking out connections on one’s own is also echoed by in the popular press by teacher leader Meeno Rami. She notes in order for teachers to

thrive, they need to seek out people and conversations—including mentors and networks—which may or may not be in their school (3).

Baker-Doyle's concept of boundary crossers is helpful for this study as Tytler et al.'s framework positions the professional teacher as involved in the discourse community of the local community, making the teacher as theorized by Tytler et al. inherently a boundary crosser. Both Tytler et al. and Baker-Doyle have similar concepts of the teacher involved in different discourse communities and networks; however, these are both studied in two different cultural settings: rural Australia and more urban America. In urban settings, the connection with the community might be inherently more difficult as the community is much larger.

In summary, the literature that shapes this project comes from several sources. The rural professional development, both that of face-to-face and online, helps to provide a framework and themes for thinking about what sustains rural teachers professionally. The research on conversation provides a framework for conversation as a place for collaboration and invention, which is often of a more intellectual nature. The literature on teacher talk speaks of both professional and personal aspects, including emotional support. Tytler et al. helps to provide a structure for both a portion of the interviews and the analysis as well. This scholarship has helped inform my research questions as I seek to understand what conversations these rural North Dakota Language Arts teachers are engaging in and what role they play in sustaining them as teachers. Understanding rural North Dakota Language Arts teachers' conversation experience is important for North Dakota educators and education; however, it also might have implications for teachers in general.

CHAPTER THREE. METHODS

For this study, I interviewed six sustained rural North Dakota Language Arts teachers in order to answer the research questions: What conversations are sustained rural North Dakota Language Arts teachers engaging in? and What role does conversation play in sustaining rural North Dakota Language Arts teachers? These six rural North Dakota teachers have a combined 129 years of teaching experience and represent a range of North Dakota rural as the town sizes they teach in vary from around 700 to around 3,000 people. They all teach in Class B schools with a high school population of less than 325 students.

In conducting qualitative interviews, I use the approach of social construction. In Herbert J. Rubin and Irene S. Rubin's book *Qualitative Interviewing: The Art of Hearing Data*, they note: "Many qualitative researchers follow a *naturalistic approach*, often guided by a *social construction approach* that focuses on how people perceive their worlds and how they interpret their experiences. These researchers argue that people construct their own realities based on their experiences and interpretations" (3). Thus, my goal is to compare and contrast the six realities, looking for patterns and important sources and roles of conversation.

In adopting a constructivist worldview, I acknowledge, as Creswell notes, that my "personal, cultural, and historical experiences" color the way I interpret the research (8). My personal experience as a former resident of rural North Dakota shaped this project in the questions I asked, the analysis of the data, and the recruiting of participants. As a former student and teacher in rural North Dakota, I bring pre-existing experiential knowledge to this project about the nature of rural North Dakota as I have experienced it as a white, middle class female. Also, to some degree, I have shared cultural knowledge with these six teachers who are also in a similar demographic of being white, middle class, and female. This is a generally shared

demographic for the Language Arts teachers in North Dakota, not just those in rural schools. In the 2013-2014 school year, the North Dakota Department of Public Instruction reported that 376 out of 389 (or 96.6%) of North Dakota's English/Language Arts teachers were white (D-1) with 316 of them also female (or 81.2%) (C-2). Thus, I talked to teachers who are in the majority of the demographic; however, I acknowledge that there are other demographics of North Dakota Language Arts teachers and they are important as well.

These teachers represent a convenience sample as I knew each of them prior to the interviews. I acknowledge this sample size is not representative of the entire state of North Dakota; however, for a qualitative study, these teachers provide a glimpse into the conversational world of a sustained rural North Dakota Language Arts teacher. Additionally, for a qualitative study, Creswell notes that sample size depends on the study and a small sample is appropriate in qualitative studies (189).

I recruited six rural North Dakotan Language Arts teachers who I previously knew either by being in the same geographic region or from involvement in extracurricular activities and professional organizations, such as North Dakota Council of Teachers of English (NDCTE) and Communication, Speech Theater Association of North Dakota (CSTAND) from across the state. I had previously talked with each of them about education; however, I had not talked with them extensively. If a continuum existed where six represented close friendship and zero was no relationship, I would place most of our relationships around the three mark. These six teachers I would consider colleagues as we have had the same shared experience of being a rural Language Arts teacher in North Dakota, even though I am not teaching in that setting currently. As a former rural North Dakota Language Arts teacher and rural North Dakota K-12 student, I am positively favored towards rural education; I approached the interviews with my experiential and

conversational knowledge about rural North Dakota Language Arts teachers, but also with the eyes and ears of someone who has not taught in rural North Dakota for four years.

These six teachers are or have been involved professionally in and beyond their schools. They represent a fairly wide range of “rural,” a term which, as noted by rural education researcher Michael Corbett, is hard to pinpoint (2). The town sizes these teachers represent range from about 700 to 3,000, and all six teachers teach in rural “Class B” schools, the North Dakota High School Activities Association term often used in rural North Dakota to talk about small schools. This means that the high school population is under 325 (North Dakota High School 2). These rural Class B schools represented by these six teachers are also located at least 40 miles from a larger North Dakota city. These six teachers are thus involved in smaller English departments. Table 1 showcases the total number of Language Arts teachers in the department. If a department has a teacher that only teaches English part time, that is represented by decimals. Some schools have teachers who are certified in multiple subjects and teach only part time in Language Arts, while other teachers are only part-time. Combined, the teachers had 129 years of teaching experience, ranging from 9 years of teaching experience to 44 years of experience.

Table 1. Participants and Teaching Experience

Pseudonyms	Years Teaching Experience	7-12 Department Make-Up
1. “Rose”	18 years	3
2. “Holly”	9 years	2
3. “Violet”	29 years	2
4. “Jasmine”	15 years	3.6
5. “Lily”	44 years	2.5
6. “Heather”	14 years	2

In conducting the qualitative interviews, I used semi-structured interviews (see Appendix A). The interview questions were in part guided by Tytler et al.'s framework for thinking about teacher professional identity with additional questions added to help answer my research questions about sustainability and the context of rural North Dakota. The semi-structured interviews ranged in length from about 30 minutes to 45 minutes. Three of the interviews were conducted face-to-face, two were conducted via Google Hangouts, and one was conducted via a phone call.

I recorded and transcribed all the interviews. In the reporting of the direct quotes, I removed verbal filler words, such as repeated "you know" and "ums." In order to analyze the data, I first listened to the interviews a second time. I then read the transcripts and used Tytler et al.'s three discourse communities as a foundation to map the data visually (see Appendix B). I did this in order to visualize and understand first what conversations the six teachers reported and then to help understand their role for sustaining the teachers. Tytler et al. envisioned the framework as a Venn diagram as the different discourse communities overlap at times; however, I was not only unable to fit the conversations into the Venn diagram, but I also wanted to use connection lines to help me think through the role of these conversations. Each line drawn on the map represents one teacher's reporting of that specific type of conversation. I also drew written conversations inside the circles and face-to-face conversations outside of the circles. Pulling apart the three discourse communities to draw the conversation map for the six rural North Dakota teachers helped me to better identify patterns in the data, but the map has its limitations as it is quite complicated to read and deciding which conversations connected (or didn't connect) to which discourse community was sometimes more difficult than it seemed. For example, I chose not to connect conversations with students to the local community and just kept them in

the local school community; however, on some levels the conversations with students could and do put teachers in conversation with the local community. I also put both events where conversations were reported and people with whom they had conversations on the map. The map helped to visualize the data, clarify my thinking, and report the data in Chapters 4 and 5.

Respect, responsibility, and reciprocity were my research guiding principles. In the context of rural education research, Anderson and Lonsdale note the importance of “respect, responsibility, and reciprocity” (193). They define *respect* as “showing that other ways of thinking and knowing are valued and treated equally” (196), *responsibility* as “conducting research that is transparent in its process and fair in its conclusions” (197), and *reciprocity* as “engaging in a higher degree of connection with those in the research activities than would be the case in a more formal or anonymous kind of research project” (200). These six teachers gave me their time and stories, and I am trying to give something back: respect, representation, and hopefully insight into how professional development for other teachers can lead to sustained teaching careers.

After obtaining appropriate permission from the IRB and from the teachers, half of the teachers desired to remain anonymous and did not want to disclose their teaching location. Thus, I kept all the teachers anonymous, giving them pseudonyms. In the presentation and analysis of the data, I also honored their anonymity and sought to draw on the experience of the six teachers fairly equally, not simply telling their experience with conversation but maintaining an appropriate balance of summary, paraphrase, and direct quotation. Additionally, it is my hope that this research will serve a reciprocal function and help others to understand and better prepare for the benefits and challenges of being a rural teacher. Limitations of this method include only interviewing six female participants and only one interview with each participant.

CHAPTER FOUR. REPORTED CONVERSATIONS

This chapter presents the results and discussion from the qualitative interviews to answer the question, “What conversations are sustained rural North Dakota Language Arts teachers engaging in?” I use Tytler et al.’s framework to structure the reporting of the results and part of the discussion for this question. In reporting the conversations, I include anecdotes from the teachers in order to give a clearer picture of what these conversations are. In this chapter I also discuss the conversations, pulling in additional insights from the six teachers not necessarily directly reported in the results and making connections back to the literature. In Chapter 5, I will build on this chapter’s reported conversations and anecdotes in order to explore “what role these conversations play in sustaining rural North Dakota Language Arts teacher.” I am separating the two research questions into two different chapters as they explore a different level of depth of these teacher conversations. Both of the questions are important, and the “what conversations” informs the “role of conversations in sustaining.” However, the first question answered in this chapter works on more of a surface level, while the second question delves deeper into more of the interpreting meaning that Creswell notes qualitative social constructivist research seeks (8). Separating the chapters helps more fully answer the questions as this chapter in part sets a foundation for the next chapter.

The Conversations

All six teachers reported extensive conversations in all three of Tytler et al.’s discourse communities: the subject-matter community, the school community, and the local community. As illustrated in my diagram of reported conversations (see Appendix B), almost all the conversations fit in the three communities framework; however, I noted that Tytler et al.’s framework does not include a space for the discourse community about general education

beyond the local school. Two teachers noted involvement in the North Dakota Education Association seminars and I did not know what discourse community that conversation was part of, whether in the subject-matter community or the local community or if it needed its own sub-category.

Subject-Matter Community

Tytler et al. is most concerned about access to the subject-matter discourse community as the connections are not as seemingly easy to make for rural Australian teachers (878-9). In the conversations reported in the interviews, the six teachers reported a variety of conversations occurring in the subject-matter community. This community included the most written conversations out of the three discourse communities. However, the teachers did not just rely on written conversations as there was a balance of face-to-face conversations as well. These conversations were reported both with specific people and at specific places. At the specific places, such as conferences and school-related activities, the teachers did not necessarily identify specific people, but the teachers reported that conversations happened there.

Email with colleagues and friends

Four teachers reported emailing colleagues and teacher friends. Heather noted email as a way to stay connected during the day with her fellow Language Arts co-worker who was on the first floor while she was on the second. However, most of the email conversations were with teachers in other schools. Email conversations were reported with teachers in the region and district, with the local speech coaches, with former co-workers and friends who are now at a different school, with teachers met at state education projects, and with online masters cohorts.

Rose talked of the teachers she met during her online masters classes as her “sounding board.” She reported turning to these teachers because they are in the same situation as she is and

are able to “offer up great advice.” She also spoke of the teachers she met through a state curriculum committee who provide her not only with lessons and help with standards, but also emotional support as well:

Even though I’ve been doing this for 18 years, you still have some low days and you have some high days. And so it’s great to have other people who understand what you’re going through to share maybe just a vent session with what you’re going through, and then obviously they can help provide suggestions on how to deal with it. But also sharing your “aha moments” with them and things that you are doing well in the classroom.

She also spoke of getting feedback from her teacher friends with whom she started her teaching career because she doesn’t have an immediate sounding board like they do as they now teach in a larger school. The idea of emailing to stay connected with teacher friends and colleagues in other locations emerged as a common trend for the teachers.

Online social media and websites

Two teachers reported following blogs and two reported going to specific websites to listen for teaching ideas and resources. Three teachers reported using Twitter and Facebook. Rose noted, “I follow a lot of educational things on Twitter. And once again, it’s the time thing.” Some teachers liked Twitter because it was brief and helped them to save time, but Jasmine said it was too brief. She preferred Facebook because she could contribute more. She had participated in a book study with teachers from across the nation last summer vacation. She reported enjoying online connections as it is “a nice way to interact with other teachers and find out what they’re doing.” Heather noted that she went online to listen to professional ideas, but not to share any ideas. For her, she was seeking out additional professional development, something she noted

rural teachers often have to do in order to not only “develop and grow” but to not “stagnate.” She noted, “I think it’s pretty easy to stagnate.”

The two most experienced teachers did not report turning to the Internet for teaching conversations or resources. Violet noted, “So I’ve never been much for a lot of online blogging conversation, not that I don’t Facebook and stuff like that. But it’s not where I want to go for my professional development . . . I deal with people, so I need to talk to people.” The idea of going to the Internet for professional development seemed too impersonal for Violet, and Lily did not go to the Internet for professional development either. However, Lily did report using an in-house messaging system to communicate with teachers in the district for subject-matter help; these conversations were with teachers she already had a relationship with. There does seem to be a generational difference with the willingness to turn to conversations and resources on the Internet. The idea of a generation gap with newer technology and ideas emerged when Holly spoke of more critical conversations. She noted that the district or regional teacher meetings contained some critical conversations dealing with “newer ideas or tools” as the “older teachers did tend to seem a little more critical or negative” at first. However, she noted that the older teachers have seemed to accept that “this is not going away” and are more open to the ideas that the younger teachers have.

Returning Students

Four teachers talked of the interactions with students who returned for conversations after leaving their classroom for the next level. Three of the teachers spoke in terms of both emotional and intellectual feedback as they learned that the returning students had benefited from their teaching. In responding to what conversations have shaped her teaching practice, Jasmine replied, “Probably conversations with students—that would be a big one every year whether

seniors or returning students saying, ‘Yes, you’re still teaching students what those students need to know at the next level.’ That’s probably one of the most sustaining, you know, hoping that I help them prepare.” Violet also gave a very specific example of a student returning to thank her for preparing him for the next level as an example of the “little things” that sustain her as a teacher. These conversations were reported as deeply important.

North Dakota Council of Teachers of English Conference

All six teachers reported that the North Dakota Council of Teachers of English Conference was a valuable place of conversation and professional development. Not all teachers are currently in the practice of attending the conference, but all attended at one point in time and were involved at varying degrees.

Holly reported, “Going to the state English teacher’s convention there’s always conversation there that will come up that will inspire me, give me more ideas, help me maybe clarify or reinterpret something that I’ve been struggling with in my classroom.” For Violet, being the only teacher at the grade level made involvement with state groups (both NDCTE and C STAND) vital to know what to teach and to know what expectations to have of her students. The expectations component spoke to her concern that she sometimes knew her students too well in the rural school and did not prepare them to the level that they needed to be at when they left. She also noted that the groups and conferences put her in contact with college instructors. Jasmine noted that the NDCTE conference stood out among continuing education opportunities as a chance to talk to other teachers to see what they are doing and how they are “adapting to changing standards” and to get “new ideas.”

Heather talked about how the NDCTE conference was one of a few places where she was able to talk with other teachers. She reported taking advantage of opportunities where she can

“just sit down with teachers” because they often finish “whatever the assignment is” and then they have a chance to really talk with each other. She viewed these moments—that she reported also occurred within the organization of C STAND and training for the state mentor program—as opportunities “to really see what’s going on.” The NDCTE conference is a one-time event held in the summer and these teachers reported it as an important place of conversation as it put them in contact with not just other teachers but sometimes college professors as well.

Education Consortiums/Cooperatives

Three teachers talked of regional education consortiums or cooperatives. The two teachers with the most teaching experience both talked highly of experiences with educational consortiums. Lily noted,

One of the ones that was really important for many years and again this was before the ease of the Internet, was the Consortium had both a leadership council and I was a part of that. And so we met like once a month and it was teachers from all different disciplines. And we got together and talked about various educational philosophies and strategies; and then at that time, they also once a year had a day when the teachers from the various disciplines could get together just for a sharing and learning day and those were extremely important.

Violet also reported that when the local educational cooperative gathered the local content area teachers together the in-service hours were actually beneficial. She noted that they would “share lessons” and “commiserate with each other” in a “very relaxed atmosphere” where the local teachers were encouraged to facilitate at different meetings. She reported this as a good and valuable experience. These two teachers communicated the value of gathering teachers together

from different local schools to talk with a shared purpose. It is interesting to note that these were also the teachers who both reported not using the Internet for professional development purposes.

Other Subject-Matter Conversations

Other conversations mentioned were those with professional authors at conferences or the local school, a local National Writing Project Summer Institute and the conversations that continued after the summer institute, the extracurricular activity of speech as a gathering place for colleagues, the state mentorship trainings, a reading group with fellow English teachers in the local school district, and state curriculum projects. All teachers mentioned they had taken numerous continuing education credits, but they did not speak of these specifically in terms of conversation and did not emphasize that these were important. Two teachers mentioned the North Dakota Education Association (NDEA) seminars, and those could be considered part of general education, not necessarily subject-specific.

Local School Community

The teachers all reported conversations with the local school community. The local school community had the least amount of written conversations as only two were reported, and both were electronic communication with other teachers in the district.

Current students

Several teachers noted that knowing students well was one of the benefits of being a rural North Dakota Language Arts teacher, but they often noted that this was a challenge as well. Jasmine emphasized interactions with her students as a benefit to teaching in rural North Dakota and as shaping conversations for her teaching. She reported enjoying seeing the students' personalities and interactions, including loving teaching her own kids. The conversations with current students happened not just in the classroom, but also in the school halls, the community,

and with involvement in extracurricular activities. Rose reported a more formal conversation of asking students to reflect at the end of each unit in order to better understand her teaching. In talking of the benefits of teaching in rural North Dakota, she noted that smaller class sizes helped her establish a closer relationship to the students, something that she worked at before she actually taught the students by talking with them in the hallways. Rose also noted that teaching in a rural setting means getting the students back for another year, which can be both a benefit as relationships and conversations are already in place, but also a negative as well if there is tension in that relationship.

The idea of shared experience emerged in the reporting of conversations with students. Holly notes, “The blurred lines sometimes of school and non-school life ...If I go to the grocery store and I’m having a rough night. I’m going to see kids there, whether I want to or not. There isn’t as much separation.” Holly also noted that sometimes she learned things about her students that she didn’t “necessarily need or want to know.” She used the comparison of students like family, which she notes makes the “professional line” a “little tricky sometimes” with the amount of shared experience. However, for her, being involved in her students’ lives outside of the school helped her to encourage her students to write in the classroom. She noted that there are “pros and cons” to teaching in the rural setting.

Violet also used the family comparison to talk about her students and noted, “not every family member you like.” She spoke of the positives of being able to shape the students her way, but also the negatives that if “something sets you off wrong, it sets the tone for the rest of their education with you. As they don’t really have any other options and neither do I. [LAUGHTER].” Heather had also used the language of family to describe her school culture. The nature of small towns means teachers will have more conversations with students, whether

that is simply in the fact that it is common to teach the students more than one year or that they see them around school or town. This shared experience leads to shared knowledge, which can be both a positive and a negative. Knowing the students better leads to focusing on the students, but some teachers expressed concern about not holding high enough student learning expectations due to knowing the students too well. Regardless, the conversations with students emerged as important for these teachers.

Administration and School Board

In answering the question about conversations that were more critical or evaluative, four of the six teachers talked about evaluative conversations with their administration. However, two teachers talked about conversations with their administrators in non-evaluative instances. Lily noted that she is very comfortable talking with her principal, superintendent, and school board members “about any concerns or just share what’s going on in my classroom.” She linked this comfort to the rural setting and her longevity as a teacher. Holly reported more conversations with her superintendent as she is on a superintendent advisory committee.

Conversations with school board members also emerged. Violet noted she tries to make it to several school board meetings each year and “that keeps me in contact with my board members and the community members who show up at the board.” Additionally, Lily recounted a conversation from her first year of teaching that really encouraged and shaped her teaching practice: a school board member called her to encourage her as a first year teacher. The conversations with the school board also ultimately connect the teachers to the community as the board is comprised of community members. The nature of a rural setting lends itself to more opportunities to meet with the school board in the community and to know them beyond their role as a school board member, to know them as people.

Informal conversations with other teachers

All six teachers shared informal conversations with other teachers in the local school. These conversations were reported in the hall, at lunch, or outside of the school day and walls. Rose emphasized lunch conversations as her “adult time,” and Holly spoke of impromptu conversations with her co-workers:

Well, again, a lot of my conversations happen kind of impromptu. We’ll walk into each other’s classrooms on different days or after school when we kind of need a little bit of a break [LAUGHTER] after spending 8 hours of kids being rambunctious, or lessons that maybe gone awry ... We hang out on the weekends too sometimes, and school topics will come up then as well.

Jasmine talked of a long-standing next-door neighbor informal mentoring relationship: “She was right next door. We talked together for many, many years. Oh, the transitioning of students too was so easy because I kind of understood what she had covered with them, where she was at.” Additionally, in responding to the question of any more critical or evaluative conversations, Jasmine reported her mentor would tell her to “enjoy it” and “to try and find some fun in it.” She noted that she could get caught up in the technicalities and she would remind her “to enjoy this along the way also.” These informal conversations were places where the teachers not only supported each other, but also at times were sites of shared enjoyment. Most teachers seemed to enjoy their relationships with their co-workers.

Two other teachers reported conversations as a place to support their colleagues. Lily reported written communication with elementary teachers about Language Arts content and verbal communication across the hall with other English teachers. Heather noted lunch as a time to listen to see if any teachers were struggling and would try to help them later. She also reported

being friends with colleagues outside of the school as well and talking about school with them, even when they tried not to talk about school.

Committees, Local Professional Development, and Other Conversations

Several teachers reported being involved with committees. Some of these committees put the teachers in contact with other Language Arts teachers, both in the secondary and the elementary schools, and with teachers from other disciplines. Teachers also reported involvement with the local education association. Partnership with elementary teachers was also reported. Teaching in smaller schools, these teachers reported many school conversations beyond their own department. Also, Rose had noted that in a small school, teachers are often asked to be more involved in committees and take on extra duties. This tends to put teachers in conversation with more teachers and school personnel.

Local Community

All six teachers reported conversations with the local community. Some teachers spoke more in-depth about the importance of these conversations than other teachers. The conversations in the local community were more likely to occur at events, but were also reported with individual people. The idea of more informal and impromptu conversations emerged in this discourse community. The local community also did not have very many written conversations reported.

Parent-teacher conferences

Violet noted that parent-teacher conferences are a “major” way to have a conversation with the local community. Both Rose and Heather talked of enjoying parent-teacher conferences in a small town. Rose noted, “Parent-teacher conferences are actually fun in a rural area because

you end up talking about their child and then you end up visiting about other things as well.” Heather reported that they are “legendary,” “epic,” and “fun”:

...one because I’ve communicated well before with parents before. No one ever gets surprised when we have that conversation, to me that’s always huge. And as a parent, I don’t want to be surprised by an academic failing or I don’t want to hear suddenly that I have a horrible child [LAUGHTER], no parent does.

The parent-teacher conferences are intrinsically face-to-face conversations, but two of these teachers noted that the conversations are more like an extension of a previous conversation. The idea of communicating with parents beyond a twice-a-year conference emerged for Rose and Heather. A factor here might be the fact that teachers in a rural setting often teach siblings, which allows the teachers to know whole families and the families to know the teacher and the teacher’s personality and methods. Lily spoke of a fun conversation with second-generation students and their parents. She has taught both the parents and the students, and she reported enjoying the conversations that compare the learning experiences. This is an extraordinary example of an extension of a previous conversation.

Involvement with School Activities

Five out of the six teachers reported being involved with school activities either as a coach/advisor or as a fan—or both—and the conversations that occurred either at the activities or about the activities. Violet recalled that when her kids were young, “we all [the teachers] were required to take tickets at ball games and I’d have conversations with the general public about my teaching.” Violet reported the games as a place to have conversations, and Lily spoke of extracurricular activities as a place not just of conversation, but of relationship building:

We [she and her husband] attend many sporting events almost all of them in town. We still go to some out of town. The music things. We try to get in to hear some speeches at least once a year, so yes, as many of those as we possibly can. And that helps too that when students and parents realize that you are interested in that aspect of their lives, why, just talking to people there, not necessarily about school even, seems to build a relationship and a trust.

Holly spoke of the students noticing if she is at activities: “they pay attention to whether or not I’ve shown up and a lot of them ask too, ahead of time. ‘Are you coming?’ It’s hard to say no to those. [LAUGHTER] it’s really hard to say no to those sometimes.” She also reported,

I see, you know, parents at sporting events or other extracurriculars, get to have an impromptu conversation with them then or someone in the community will see me and know that I’m in charge of speech or something and they’ll ask me how the speech team is doing this year or I saw in the paper that... and so we get the conversations that way too. They are very involved even in the summers.

The extracurricular activities are a space where the school and local community can meet. While there is not a guarantee that conversations will happen there, many of these teachers reported that conversations often happen here.

Informal/impromptu conversations in the community

The teachers reported these informal conversations occurred not just at school-sponsored extracurricular activities. Due to the smaller size of the towns, Rose noted, “you never really get to escape your teaching because you’re out in the community and everyone knows who you are and a lot of times your social conversations come back to your teaching.” Lily reported,

In a rural area, parents have a tendency to still be more involved, to work more closely with the school, to be more receptive to teachers not just as teachers but teachers as people. I think it really helps when parents are able to meet their child's teacher at the grocery store and have a conversation there or sit across each other at a church dinner and talk about things other than school. I don't know if there would be that much opportunity for that type of interaction in a larger place.

Heather finds conversations with the community important: "Those [conversations with the community] definitely are huge. Huge....I work really hard to try to be very visible in the community, you know, as a community member and to participate in events." She also noted that by being involved in the community and her church, she can "understand a little better where someone's coming from...and it's helpful to then [SIGH] empathize better, to have a better sense of what it is they might need...So. Trying to keep my ear to the ground. You know, show up every once in a while at events. Be a part of it."

There is also a negative side to these informal conversations. Violet talked about the gossip: "you have to stay on top of things because rumors happen.... the town knows things you've done before you've actually done them." She gives an example of how a classroom activity with playing cards might morph in the rumor mill into students gambling at the school. There are both positives and negatives to teaching in a smaller, rural community.

Other Community Conversations

Three teachers noted conversations with parents over the phone, while only one noted parent emails. The idea of the school website as a way to communicate was mentioned, as was PowerSchool, an online grading system. The local newspaper was mentioned twice as a way that

concurrently shared what was happening at the school with the community and was a means for community members to initiate conversations with teachers. Church was also mentioned. Additionally, a local arts group put one teacher in conversation with other non-school community members.

Discussion of Conversations Reported

Overall, the six teachers reported conversations in each of the three different discourse communities, even though some of them reported more conversations in specific communities. Thus, Tytler et al.'s framework does seem to be productive in organizing the different conversations that these six teachers reported as engaging in. The only conversation that did not fit neatly was the idea of conversations with general education (not necessarily subject specific), like the NDEA seminars.

Tytler et al. posited that the specific subject-matter community would be the most difficult for rural Australian teachers to participate in. While a few of these six North Dakota Language Arts teachers did note a lack of an immediate sounding board to bounce ideas off and some expressed professional concern about student expectations, as a trend they have found strategies and conversations to stay connected in and beyond their school to professional communities. Some of the teachers are keenly cognizant that they have to seek out this extended professional development. Lily noted that rural teachers must be creative in how they network. She also acknowledged that this is probably easier today with the Internet. Additionally, Heather spoke of basically creating her own department—beyond the one other Language Arts teacher at her school—by reaching out to people around the state, including contacts with higher education. These teachers did not rely solely on their school for professional development, but often were part of networks of teachers that reached beyond their school. These networks came from formal

organizations such as C STAND or NDCTE, extracurricular activities, curriculum development committees or from more informal connections with friends and former colleagues.

The full extent to which these teachers are involved in these professional conversations is beyond the scope of this project; however, the teachers did report participating in the larger conversation with teachers across North Dakota, specifically at the NDCTE conference and connections with teacher friends and former colleagues. Also, some of the teachers had been involved both locally and at the state level in conversations about curriculum. Tytler et al.'s concern about rural teachers' connections to the subject-matter specific community did not emerge as prominently in this study, but these teachers did report that they had to seek out the professional conversations often on their own. They had to work more to be involved in this conversation. However, this was also something that Rami advocates for in her book *Thrive*, which does not focus on rural teachers specifically.

An especially interesting conversation emerged that connected the teachers indirectly to the subject-matter community: returning students. Although this conversation could also connect the teachers with the local community, I found the most intriguing connection to be that with higher education. This conversation indirectly gave feedback from the university through the students. Two of the teachers reported conversations with professors, with the organization of C STAND highlighted as being a good source of this as well as NDCTE at times. Heather reported seeking out conversations with local colleges independently, desiring to know what students need to know and if the students from her school are prepared. For her, college-readiness is more important than tests as the students need to be ready to move to the next level. Heather more intentionally reported seeking out this conversation in order to better prepare her students. These teachers were highly focused and concerned about their students learning. The

post-graduation conversations, rather than test scores, seemed to provide a source of achievement for these teachers.

Some scholarship and considerable lore explore the potential for online communities to keep rural educators connected beyond their classrooms. Several teachers reported using online communication to stay connected to the subject matter community. These conversations linked the teachers with the professional world outside of their schools. Twitter and Facebook were most mentioned for social media conversations. Using Twitter was linked to the concept of time and ease. Time seemed to be an obstacle for these teachers, which was the biggest obstacle that Hunt-Barron et al. found in their study on teachers use of blogs. Rose spoke specifically about using Twitter because it was brief and did not take much time. For her, as a Language Arts teacher, correcting student papers takes a considerable amount of time added onto the fact that rural teachers are often asked to be more involved in the local school with committees, advising, and coaching. The idea of lack of time surfaced for Jasmine as well. While she did not tie it specifically to online, Jasmine noted a challenge of teaching in rural North Dakota was one of time. She linked the lack of time to correcting, but then also speculated about the number of classes a teacher has to prep for, which would add an extra time element. Jasmine did use online methods for professional development, but it is interesting to note that she did the Facebook book study on her own time during the summer while on a vacation. For Rose, emails were clearly linked to time and ease. Thus, the idea that rural Language Arts teachers have limited time might both encourage online participation and conversation and discourage it at the same time.

Overall, these teachers were more likely to listen to the conversation beyond their friend network online than participate in it, with Jasmine being the exception. Jasmine found the

medium of Facebook much more conducive to use for conversation as Twitter was too brief for her; she wanted to contribute more. Of the five reasons Hur and Brush found why teachers voluntarily participate online, Jasmine spoke of three of them: exploring ideas, combating isolation, and a finding source of camaraderie (290-291). These online conversations put the teachers in contact with teachers around the nation, even if they were only listening. However, online also served as a way for the teachers to connect with teachers they already had relationships with across North Dakota as well. This was especially true for email, but also reported with Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat. For these teachers, they were more likely to contribute to the conversation via an electronic medium when they had prior personal connections.

The more face-to-face subject-matter conversations were most likely at conferences, educational consortium gatherings, speech meets, and state curricular projects. These teachers are not just in places where conversations happen, but they engage in them as well. Conferences are often a once a year gathering and educational consortium and state curricular projects may meet a variety of times; however, the nature of speech is such that schools compete at meets almost every weekend during the speech season, which runs from January to April. While speech coaches are often also judges, they do have time off during the meet. This provides a space for the teachers who are also speech coaches to enter into sustained conversation, which allows for the deeper conversation Rust and Orland note. Violet reported conversations at speech meets were important conversations for her and that her colleagues there were her friends. The speech network became a place of sustained conversation.

The conversations reported in the local school community showcase involvement in the local school and interaction with different teachers across not only department boundaries but

grade level boundaries as well. All but two of these reported conversations in the local school were face-to-face. This indicates that these teachers were more-or-less involved in interpersonal relationships with their colleagues. This connects to Morrison's concern for teachers to be engaged in interpersonal relationships and also to Baker-Doyle's call for teachers to be engaged in the local school culture. All six teachers reported informal conversations with teachers in their local school. This means that they were in places where others were in order to have these conversations. These conversations took place in the hall, at the lunch table, and in other people's classrooms. These teachers do not appear to be staying isolated in their classrooms, but are engaging in conversations with both teachers and students alike throughout the day. Isolation is a concern for Palmer, Goodlad, and Ingersoll and these teachers, while they do speak of isolation, seem to be proactive in not staying isolated.

In the conversations with their students, the teachers reported conversations in a variety of situations. Sometimes this was in the context of the classroom, but other times it was in the hallway or in the community. Tytler et al. categorizes the students as part of the local school community, but they could also represent connections to the local community if the conversations with students are out in the local community. Many teachers reported seeing their students outside of the school setting. Baker-Doyle classifies students as Diverse Professional Allies, whose job she identifies is to keep the focus on the students and "help teachers to think innovatively" (64). These six teachers are in contact with many Diverse Professional Allies in the form of parents, students, and community members. These teachers know their students well, with two of them wondering if they know too much about their students. Knowing students too well was presented as both a benefit and a challenge for teaching in rural North Dakota. The shared experiences of these teachers, students, and community members can help the teachers

teach better; however, there is a negative side as well. Holly noted that sometimes she knew things about her students that she didn't need or want to know. Violet noted that students become like family, but families do not always get along. When teachers encounter difficult relationships, Violet put it well, if "something sets you off wrong, it sets the tone for the rest of their education with you. As they don't really have any other options and neither do I." This can then be a challenging conversation for teachers.

Baker-Doyle, in writing from a more urban perspective, notes that teachers need to find boundary crossers to help them make connections in the community (76). These teachers appear to be those boundary crossers. A main way this happens is by being present in the community, with school activities being a major place where these two communities intersect. In rural North Dakota Class B schools, school activities are often a major gathering place for the community. While sports do seem to be a main community focus, these school activities are not just sports. Regardless of the activity, these teachers are in spaces where they can have those impromptu conversations they reported. These teachers have had time to establish conversations in the community and still go to these activities, even after establishing their teaching careers.

In looking for patterns, most of the conversations that occurred in the local school community and local community were face-to-face, with more of a reported emphasis of being informal. These conversations tended to be more dependent on being in certain locations, whether at lunch or in the hallway for the local school or at school activities or in the grocery store for the local community. While different teachers connect in different ways, sometimes with an emphasis on different discourse communities, the general trend is that these teachers are not staying isolated in their classrooms; they are also engaging in conversations outside of their classroom. Not staying isolated in their classrooms is important as Dworkin cited structural

isolation as one of the factors leading to teacher burnout. These connected conversations that the six teachers are participating in seem to help alleviate that isolation. However, simply engaging in conversation does not necessarily mean that the conversations are serving all positive roles. Thus, it is important to move even deeper into this phenomenon of teacher conversation and analyze further the role these conversations play in sustaining these rural North Dakota Language Arts teachers. Chapter 5 builds upon the work started in this chapter.

CHAPTER FIVE. CONVERSATION'S ROLE IN SUSTAINING

This chapter presents the interview data that relates to the two questions that directly addressed the idea of sustaining: “What sustains you as a teacher?” and “What role does conversation play in sustaining rural North Dakota teachers?” The teachers were asked the “sustain” question towards the beginning of the interview, while the question about conversation was the final structured interview question. I juxtapose each teacher’s answer to the first question and the final question. I also report some of the insights that some teachers offered about conversation in general. Then, I discuss the role that conversation plays in sustaining these six teachers by using the data directly related to sustaining from this chapter, insights from the previous chapter’s data about what conversations the teachers are engaging in, additional insights from the interviews, and connections from the literature. For this chapter, I do not follow the previous chapter’s structure of reporting according to Tytler’s discourse community framework. The conversations reported in that format in the previous chapter help to think through what conversations teachers have, but this chapter is moving towards the deeper role the conversations might have.

Results of What Sustains and Conversation’s Role in Sustaining Interview Questions

Rose noted that the actual teaching part is what sustains her in the classroom, and she talked of the role of conversation in sustaining teachers as a way to advocate to different stakeholders—specifically mentioning community members, both parents and those who do not have kids in school—the importance of English teachers and a strong educational system for the area. She also mentioned advocating for rural schools as positive places for teachers to work.

Holly reported being sustained as a teacher by co-workers both inside and outside of school, her connection to a community arts group, friends outside of school, church, and family.

In response to conversation's role, Holly noted, "Oh, conversations are what keep us connected, keep us inspired, provide us with new ideas, and resources for ways to improve our classroom, bring it into the 21st century." She also reported them as a "chance to vent," "question," "investigate," "interact with others, to be inspired, to find answers." She also spoke of how they helped keep her going:

They are definitely a big part of how I am able to survive [LAUGHTER] as a teacher in a rural school and an English teacher specifically. Even if it's just to say, you know, to commiserate about how much grading we all have to do and how much of our weekend will not be spent [LAUGHTER] doing fun weekend-y things like other people in other jobs [E laughs] would do. So. Yeah. They, they keep me going.

Violet reported being sustained by the "little things," such as a conversation of gratitude from a returning student expressing that he had been well prepared for college. In reference to conversation's role, she spoke in terms of intellect and emotion: "Oh, we all have to be connected conversationally...to stay on top of what the trends are in education, but to stay on top of our own emotional, classroom emotional stability, you know. Emotion, so we are stable. So we know where we're going is the right direction to go and we're not alone in that direction." She also spoke of conversation combating isolation and how the conversations are even more important if teachers are single. She also spoke of young teachers moving to a rural setting who do not have established connections like she has:

I can't imagine a fresh young teacher coming into a new school and a new community now. There is so much social isolation because of the family aspect that because of the—probably more now—because we do so much of our

socializing online that that interpersonal, actual physical connections aren't there that used be there automatically.

Jasmine noted being sustained by students' learning. She viewed conversation's role as "essential." She spoke of the early conversations helping her and reported, "if those conversations don't exist now, it can be very isolating and that's a difficult way to teach." She speaks of support and different people to "bounce ideas off," "maybe to change ideas, to look at things a different way...Otherwise it can be very isolating because you are in your classroom for so many hours of the day just by yourself with your students and sometimes your view can get a little bit skewed."

Lily reported being sustained by the positive feedback from both students and parents, which make teaching "fun and exciting." For the role of conversation, she expressed,

I think they are probably the things that keep rural North Dakota teachers teaching. You need a support system, sometimes, as I said, you have to be proactive in seeking them out... I think teaching would be way too stressful if you couldn't share and sometimes just let off some steam, [be] listen[ed] to as people, sometimes you just need a pat on the back and the encouragement that comes from parents or students or school board members. So, it's definitely all of those conversations that have kept me in education as long as I've been here.

Finally, Heather is sustained by the fact that learning is fun. She also noted later in the interview that it is sustaining to know she has in a way created her own English department by reaching out to so many people around the state at varying levels. In answering what role conversation plays in sustaining teachers, she noted, "Well, I, I can't have it without it.

[LAUGHTER] We can all start communicating with our parents and our, I mean, I think teaching is conversation. It really is. It's just doing it with 20 students at the same time. But I think most of it is a back and forth." She ultimately decided that her answer was that conversation is "what good teaching is."

A few of the teachers provided some additional insights into conversation throughout the interview and at the end of the interview. When asked if any additional insights about conversation came to mind, Jasmine talked of teaching students how to engage in conversation and noted that teaching students how to have a conversation is "a big part of our job." Heather thought about energy and how one is sometimes able to direct a conversation: "either move it this way or move it this way. You can either help someone give into or maybe reframe the conversation." She also speaks of fear of having difficult conversations:

If teachers maybe sometimes weren't afraid, I think sometimes we're afraid to have a hard conversation and so you avoid it...So we avoid that and that always comes back to bite us. It always does. When we don't have a hard conversation, either with a student, with a colleague, I think it's much easier to circumvent a problem if you sit down right away with someone. It's so hard to do this thing. "I understand you're not happy with something I've done. I understand you. Is there something you want to share?" Boy, that mitigates...don't you think? I don't know.

Lily's final words of her interview were about the nature of the conversation:

I think that one of the most important things that teachers need, new teachers need to learn is the power of that conversation and to be totally honest. Um, whenever I talk to a young teacher and say, "How's it going?" and they say,

“Oh, great, great. Everything’s wonderful.” It’s like, you’re not quite there yet. You have to be able to be honest with fellow teachers about both the good points and the bad or the stress or the things that don’t work and once you get to that point, the people in education who are willing to be there for you, to be your support system, to be your reference, to give you really anything that you need is, it’s unbelievable. Anyone who is a North Dakota educator, I think, is like part of a big family and the support is tremendous, but new teachers need to learn that first of all they have to be willing to admit that they have a lot to learn. After 44 years in the classroom, I’m still learning. I still learn from other teachers. I get excited, “Oh, that’s so cool, I want to try that in my classroom.” And, they need to realize the power of the conversation and to actually have it honestly. And once you reach a point where you can do that, we never stop learning.

Discussion of the Role of Conversations in Sustaining the Six Teachers

The responses about what sustained these teachers included the following: the actual teaching, relationships with co-workers inside and outside of school, local arts group, friends not from school, family, church, gratitude from returning students, students learning, positive feedback from students and parents, the fun aspect of learning, and reaching out to other people and creating one’s own department. These teachers responded with very “people-centered” answers. Even the two answers that did not specifically mention a person—the actual teaching and learning as fun—include students as part of that process of teaching and of learning with them. These teachers reported being sustained mainly in relationship, in connection to other people. The interpersonal relationships, especially those within the school, are important as

Morrison found that interpersonal relationships for new teachers were a sign of competency and that they had a “place within the school and the profession more generally” (122). While these six teachers are not new teachers as in Morrison’s study, they prove to have those recognized relationships that help to establish them in not just their school but often their community as well.

When the teachers spoke of the role conversation plays in sustaining, some of them spoke of the issue of isolation in teaching. Conversation was then talked of as a place for connection. This connection is for both intellectual and emotional support, with the teachers emphasizing the emotional support. However, the intellectual component is important. Conversation, as noted by Bruffee and Burke-LeFevre, is a place for invention. With these six teachers who were often the only teacher of that grade-level at their school, conversation became a place where they can gain ideas, to be inspired. Violet spoke in broad terms of knowing which direction to go professionally and to be “not alone in that direction.” Jasmine noted that it is easy to adopt a “skewed” view if she is not in conversation beyond those conversations with her students. The idea is that conversation helps teachers be together on what they are accomplishing as a profession. The conversations help to build shared knowledge. This is a part of the reported value of conferences such as NDCTE and C STAND; these groups provide a space for conversation at the conference and guidance for what to teach. Also, some of the teachers spoke of intellectual support when they talked of the concept of sounding boards and of going online to gather teaching ideas. Beyond conversing for the sake of learning new ideas and refining old ones, conversation is linked by both Jasmine and Heather as integral to the teaching process itself. Jasmine emphasized that students need to learn how to have conversations in the Language Arts classroom, and Heather noted that teaching *is* conversation with 20 students at a time.

While the idea of intellectual invention came through stronger in the reporting of what conversations teachers are engaging in, the emotional component was more prominent when the teachers were speaking of conversation's role in sustaining them as rural North Dakota Language Arts teachers. The emotional support often is one of connection and encouragement. Generally, the teachers spoke in terms of relationships, with many teachers reporting conversations with teacher friends. Additionally, the metaphor of family was used to describe both relationships with students and with colleagues around the state. With the idea of colleagues as friends, the conversation is inherently voluntary—friendship is always a volunteer relationship—and more sustained. These are the marks of good teacher talk according to Rust and Orland. Additionally, the idea of teacher conversation leading to friendship emerged in the literature also with Cavazos.

The metaphor of family does not imply voluntary, but it does include sustained conversations with the potential of trust, commitment, and love. Additionally, as Violet pointed out, family does not always get along. Violet used family to talk about her students as previously discussed in Chapter 4; however, Lily also used “family” to describe the support system of North Dakota educators. In doing so, she noted that new teachers must be willing to move beyond the idea of presenting the image to other people that they are doing great in their new jobs. Family members do not always see the best sides of each other, and teaching is stressful work. These six teachers have all been teaching for at least nine years, and for several teachers, much longer. They do not try to conceal that they too have bad days. They speak of needing to “vent,” “commiserate,” and finding ways to relieve stress.

Commiserating and venting is best done with people who share the same experience, but it is also important to note that shared experience is an integral component for laughter as well.

In the course of conducting these six interviews, I unexpectedly and surprisingly noted that these teachers were laughing as we were talking. It made me experientially realize that face-to-face conversation provides more space for emotion, both laughter and tears (although teachers only laughed in these interviews). Patrick Madden, in his essay exploring the multifaceted dimensions of laughter in *North Dakota Quarterly*, writes: “With laughter, you often ‘had to be there. [...] It means that laughter is contagious, often set by a mood more than the joke itself or the situation, that experience is never cut off from the sum of prior and concurrent experiences” (55). When rural North Dakota Language Arts teachers are together with shared knowledge, commiseration can happen, but laughter can be there as well as it activates the shared memories and knowledge. Laughter can therefore be a sign of that transformation that Rust and Orland described in sustained teacher conversations: “individual narratives becomes a shared conversation” (114).

Laughter can also be tied to healing. In a profession where the first year of teaching is more apt to revolve around tears, I find the laughter I heard and participated in during these interviews profoundly significant. Madden writes of laughter’s healing effects: “It can lighten a heavy burden; it can change the flavor of tears” (56). Teaching is stressful. It is a difficult job that someone who is not a teacher cannot quite ever comprehend completely. There is healing that needs to happen from the stress of sharing so many students’ burdens that comes with that too much knowing sometimes, sharing too much *together* at times. However, there is also healing that needs to happen in being misunderstood or only partially understood. Thus, I do not think it is any coincidence that these sustained teachers are teachers who know how to laugh. They have figured out ways to not only enjoy their jobs, but also strategies to heal from the stress of their jobs.

Another important emotional dimension is found in Lily's observation when she noted that is important for the community to see her as a *person*, not just as a teacher. This comment connects to one that Heather made at the beginning of her interview. She noted that she arrived in the classroom later in life and in noting the advantages of that she ends with, "I've had a different perspective than I would've had at 20-some years old, which I don't think I would have lasted in a classroom. The person I was then." She uses the term "person" and not "teacher." In rural communities, as Holly noted, it is hard to "escape" one's teaching as "the town is only so big." Being involved with all three discourse communities, one cannot switch from one identity to the next as they often overlap. One must learn to be a person who can operate relationally in all three communities. This can be emotionally taxing as in order to navigate the important interpersonal relationships that go beyond those at school, it does require having those difficult conversations that Heather talked about and the honest ones Lily spoke of. However, when one is willing to have the difficult and honest conversations, one is also able to be better supported because others can help to do that reframing, inventing, and encouraging that can happen within the context of the right conversations with the right people.

Conversation, whether it serves a more intellectual or emotional role, helps to create shared knowledge. Part of that shared knowledge is being involved in conversations in the different discourse communities. This shared knowledge learned through conversation can also help teachers, as Brooks noted earlier, to gain "self-knowledge and a sense of community identity" (69). In order to understand that community identity and enter into that community, one needs *to be* in conversation with it. The conversations reported by these six rural North Dakota Language Arts teachers showcase a high of degree of connectedness via conversation in all three of Tytler et al.'s discourse communities. The conversations help to create a set of shared

knowledge about what it means to be a member of the local community, the local school community, and the subject-matter community.

These six teachers are engaged in all three of these communities; thus, Tytler et al.'s framework is helpful for thinking about conversations for rural teachers; however, returning to the original framework, they seem to be mainly focused on the "teacher as professional" as that is the label they put on the inside of the Venn diagram (878). Placing "teacher as professional" at the core of these discourse communities tends to place more emphasis on the intellectual and professional side of the teacher. While it is important to be professional, Lily noted that one of the benefits of teaching in a rural place is that the community can see a teacher as a person, not just as a teacher. Tytler et al. specifically chose the term "discourse community" because "the focus is on the shared genres and lexis which enable effective community within the community rather than on a shared focus or task" (878). However, at the beginning of this study, I chose to frame this research in terms of conversation, not discourse communities. After interviewing these six teachers, I note that they are not coming together around "shared genres and lexis," but they are more or less sharing a "focus or task": that of educating students. When I asked Rose if her first year at her current school was difficult after ten years at a different North Dakota Class B school because she didn't have all the conversations in place, she replied,

I think so because you're also walking into an established—I mean, a lot of these people have gone to school here, got married, work here, and now their kids are going to school. And, so they have that close-knit relationship already established and you're coming into that. And so, you kind of have to find your groove too. But then, realizing that we're all in the

same boat. And even if you have somebody who teaches math, you're still teaching the same kids. Your end goal is the same; it's just a different subject.

These teachers on some level do use shared genres and lexis, but overall, the interviews were filled with references to people, with an emphasis on students. I acknowledge that this may be a bias of the study as I framed the interview in terms of conversation and not genres and lexis, but I did leave the definition of conversation open to include written ones. Additionally, the teachers did report some written genres; however, the main conversations, perhaps naturally due to the nature of conversation, were face to face, which allows more room for people to be human. Thus, in my analysis, the concept of conversations with the specific communities, not discourse community as Tytler et al. defines it, better captures the human element that these teachers appear to be focused on. There is something about conversation that connects people in relationship that goes beyond the discourse community concept that Tytler et al. presents. The interpersonal relationships can be found in discourse communities, but conversation is, as Turkle notes, "the most human— and humanizing— thing we do" (3). By using conversation with different communities instead of discourse communities, the intellectual side is not diminished; it simply allows more room for emotion, including laughter. Additionally, thinking locally, the concept of community is common to North Dakota as small towns are often known as communities.

CHAPTER SIX. CONCLUSION

In studying six sustained rural North Dakota Language Arts teachers, I learned that these teachers are connected relationally through conversation to all three of Tytler et al.'s theorized discourse communities. Thus, I find Tytler et al.'s framework helpful and productive for thinking through what conversations rural teachers need to be involved in; however, I question the concept of discourse communities focused on genres and lexis. These six teachers more or less share the same task and focus of educating students rather than being drawn together by a set of genres or lexis as Tytler et al. defines discourse communities. Teacher as professional is important; however, these teachers are people first who need both intellectual *and* emotional support. Teacher as professional tends to emphasize the intellectual. I therefore propose to think in terms of conversation that connects the teachers to the different communities that support both intellectual *and* emotional needs.

Additionally, Tytler et al. notes that the professional community is one that rural teachers need more connection to. These six sustained teachers are engaged in the professional community, but for new teachers in a rural school, the emphasis should be placed on the connections to the local school and community. This is because the teachers are coming straight from the university and should have relevant and current subject-matter knowledge, which can be shared with the other teachers at the school. The importance of connections via conversation to the local school affirms what Baker-Doyle advocates for: new teachers should seek support within their school as each school's "policies and culture are important factors in shaping a new teacher's support network" (7). This is true for the local community as a place of connection for a new teacher in a rural school as well. In order for new teachers to become sustained teachers, they need to cultivate conversations and thus relationships with all three communities: the local

school, the local community, and the subject-matter community. This again echoes Morrison's findings about the importance of interpersonal relationships. Thus, in this Burkean parlor research conversation, I align with those who advocate for the importance of local and emotional support. The local community is a dynamic part of the environment, and it can contribute to the emotional stability of new teachers as well.

The local rural schools and communities are not problems to be solved, which was a theme that Burton, Brown, and Johnson noted in their narrative analysis of rural education research (8). However, to overly romanticize them—another theme that emerged in their research (8)—is not correct either. Community can be inherently complicated because it consists of people with different ways of looking at the world and different emotional reactions. However, in rural North Dakota, these communities do not always seem that different as they share not just similar demographics, but also much knowledge because many people have lived there for extended periods of time. Rose pointed this out when she observed that new teachers are “walking into an established” community and conversation: “they have that close-knit relationship already established, and you’re coming into that.” She observed that teachers have to find their own “groove” because the “end goal is the same; it’s just a different subject.” That end goal is preparing their students for the next level.

In this study, I purposefully did not seek to understand why teachers leave rural North Dakota schools or why they are not sustained; instead, I sought to investigate what conversations and what role these conversations played in helping to sustain these teachers. While I acknowledge that there are many factors that could potentially contribute to these teachers being sustained beyond being involved in conversations with these three different communities (e.g. strengths as a teacher, personality, cultural background, their own education experience, marital

status, etc.), the framework of conversation provides an entry point into the idea of sustaining. This is because the right conversations with the right people can be places where communities innovate and collaborate, moving beyond the idea of “preservation” that Donehower, Hogg, and Schell resist in their discussion of sustainability. For Donehower, Hogg, and Schell, to sustain does not mean for things to stay the way they have always been. They also note that sustainability requires collaboration. These six teachers are collaborating in conversations with the three different communities; however, I did not investigate how these conversations were established, or why these teachers were invited into the conversation in the first place.

Regardless of how the conversations began, these six teachers have had time to establish conversations within the three different discourse communities. Because they have spent a sustained time teaching and living in rural North Dakota, they have a connectedness that new teachers often do not have coming in, unless they are from that same town or the region. However, even if new teachers are familiar with the area and have established conversations, the local school community is different from the vantage point of a teacher instead of a student and the subject-matter community is one that will be newer to them as well. The teacher is not the only one responsible for making a successful transition though. In thinking through teacher conversations through Tytler et al.’s framework of the local school, local community, and subject-matter community, the support a new teacher requires in order to not just survive but to be sustained in teaching in a rural North Dakota school should also come from all three of the communities as well.

Establishing these conversations that provide the intellectual and emotional support is often a challenge for teachers new to the rural schools. In small town North Dakota, this can be paradoxically both easier and more difficult at the same time. It can be easier because the

community is smaller and more accessible, but more difficult because of already established relationships, cultural differences, and the nature of small town talk that can include gossip. Additionally, joining the conversation perhaps becomes even more challenging if the teacher does not have previous connections to rural North Dakota or if they seem to be different than the demographics of the local community. It is important to note that these six teachers I interviewed *do match* the demographics of the communities in which they teach. They are white and female as are most of the Language Arts teachers in North Dakota. Those teachers who are different than the local community demographic may face greater challenges of entering into the conversations, especially those that happen on a more informal level as many of the conversations with the local community were reported.

Since the three different communities are important for sustaining these teachers and Donehower, Hogg and Schell tie sustainability to collaboration, the implications for helping a new teacher be sustained and enter into these conversations should not simply fall on the teacher. It needs to be a collaborative effort. Thus, the implications for this research are for all members of the different communities. Teachers new to a school and area should be aware of their need to be in conversation with the different communities (school, local, and subject-matter) and know that they probably will have to be more proactive to create some of those opportunities as Heather and Lily noted. The nature of rural schools allows for more spaces where teachers can connect via conversation and gain access to both intellectual and emotional support, but as noted above, this can also be a challenge as well, especially if a teacher is different than the demographics of the community. Additionally, it is important to note that simply being in the spaces and places of conversation is not in and of itself the solution. The topics and quality of the

conversation are important because small towns are also known for the negative and destructive conversation of gossip.

The local school should seek to connect teachers into the conversation with the local community, school team, and subject-matter community. Administrators could help teachers form a personalized plan of action in order to be engaged in these three conversations and help them implement the plan by connecting them with the right people and providing resources, such as funding for conferences. Teacher-to-teacher and administrator support is important as well within the local school. Veteran teachers and administrators at schools should follow Lily's suggestion and not allow new teachers to simply say, "Everything is great!" They should take the time to cultivate a conversation where the new teachers understand that it is helpful to be honest and ask for help when needed. Teachers listening to other teachers and offering support as needed can be a powerful source of intellectual and emotional support. Also, administrators and school board members could remember to send some words of encouragement as those conversations are sometimes remembered 44 years later. Both administrators and teachers alike could be more aware of the emotional needs of new teachers. Students are also a part of the local community. While new teachers might be cognizant of the smaller age gap between them and their students, the teachers can respect the students and see them as the Diverse Professional Allies that Baker-Doyle calls them. Students and their parents can help teachers become connected to both the school and local community.

The local community could also be more intentional about welcoming new teachers. The local community should want their teachers to succeed because it helps their students succeed, but they do not always know how to do so. The local community could seek creative ways to welcome the new teachers to town, and conversely, the new teachers can themselves become

involved in local community events, organizations, churches, and activities. Additionally, one of the realities of teaching in rural North Dakota schools is that of extracurricular responsibilities. Teachers should also view extracurricular activities (in moderation) as an opportunity to be in conversation with the local community instead of as a requirement and an extra duty. Extracurricular responsibilities can help to facilitate conversations not just with other local school professionals, but also with students, parents, the community, and perhaps even the subject-matter depending on the activity.

The subject-matter community could also reach out to new teachers. Since the NDCTE conference was such an important place of conversation for these teachers, making sure new Language Arts teachers are attending or know of the importance of the conference is key. NDCTE's main offering is the summer conference, but there may be creative ways to connect the teachers who have established connections at the conference to be each other's "sounding boards" when they are not in face-to-face conversations at conference. One simple implication would be establishing a NDCTE listserv so that teachers can ask questions and share lesson plan resources with teachers who also teach in the same context as them: North Dakota. This would not just be for rural North Dakota Language Arts teachers, but it would help to bring teachers into the subject-matter conversation even more actively. Using email to share ideas is something that four out of the six teachers already do within their own colleague network; a listserv would simply broaden that network.

The university is also a part of the subject-matter community conversation. However, for some of these teachers, the main connection reported was from returning students telling the secondary teachers that they were well prepared for university. C STAND and NDCTE were

mentioned as places for making the university connection, but the university connection could be even stronger.

These supports for teachers—both those new to the teaching world and those who have more experience—would be ideal, but the teacher also must take professional responsibility to engage in these conversations proactively and honestly, and to understand that these conversations are important to their success as a teacher.

Teachers new to a community should not be afraid of being seen as a person and should not be afraid of conversation. The teachers have a lot to offer to the community; they are the ones coming fresh from the university with the new ideas that can be exciting for the whole school. However, they need to engage the communities in conversation, which might include listening more at the beginning. They also need to recognize their need for support beyond the intellectual level and remember that the emotional support is a vital component to teaching, especially in the Language Arts classroom. This is because the teacher is first and foremost a person, with emotions.

Teachers, both new and sustained, should not forget that power of the honest conversation that Lily spoke of. The power of an honest conversation is that the community—whether it is the subject-matter community, local school community, or local community—wants teachers to succeed. They want a strong education for their children, but they perhaps do not always know *how* to support teachers. They cannot, after all, read teachers' minds. A conversation is required.

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APPENDIX A. INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Interview Questions to Be Used as a Guide*

*Additional follow-up questions will be asked as the conversation leads

Introduction: Greetings. Thank you for being willing to share about teacher conversations from the perspective of a rural North Dakotan Language Arts teacher. As a former teacher in this demographic, I am trying to understand what conversations experienced rural Language Arts North Dakota teachers have in order to first understand how rural teachers have been sustained and second potentially help other rural teachers have a successful experience. For the purpose of this study, a conversation can be both in person and online.

1. What was your career path? Start with when you first knew that you wanted to be a teacher.
 - a. How many years have you taught?
 - b. What educational experiences have you had beyond your undergraduate degree?
[Prompting example, if needed: For example, one summer I took the Northern Plains Writing Project Summer Institute and it immensely helped to shape my teaching.]
 - c. What locations have you taught in? Please describe in as much detail as you are comfortable in sharing.
 - d. What are the unique challenges of being a rural North Dakota teacher for your teaching practice?
 - e. What are the unique benefits of being a rural North Dakota teacher for your teaching practice?
2. What sustains you as a teacher?
3. Tell me about one or two conversations that have shaped your teaching practice.

- a. Were any of these conversations more critical and/or evaluative?
4. What other teaching conversations (face-to-face or online) do you take part in? How did you develop these conversations? [Prompting examples, if needed: For example, I found that coaching extracurricular activities—junior high basketball and speech—was an unexpected door to having teaching conversations with fellow coaches, both in my school and other schools. Also, the teaching conversation at NDCTE and C STAND conferences were helpful. I developed these because other teachers recommended that I go to these conferences.]
5. Are there conversations you just listen to but do not contribute to? For example, a lot of people speculate that rural teachers connect more online. Also, for me, sometimes I “listen” to conversations that take place online, for example on teacher blogs, but I don’t necessarily contribute.
6. Tell me about your conversations about your discipline.
7. Tell me about your conversations with the local school community.
8. Tell me about your conversations with the local community. These conversations do not just have to be with teachers in your community, but your conversations that connect you to your community.
9. After talking and thinking about conversations, what role do you think conversation plays in sustaining rural North Dakotan teachers?

Closing: Thank you for participating in this research. If I have any other questions later, would it be okay if I follow-up with you?

APPENDIX B: MAP OF SELF-REPORTED TEACHER CONVERSATIONS

