

Academic Coach and Classroom Teacher:

A Look Inside a Rural School Collaborative Partnership

Sara L. Hartman

Ohio University

This yearlong qualitative case study examines the successful collaborative partnership between a first year academic coach and a teacher in a rural school setting. The partnership became a source of interest as a means to understanding how rural school partnerships are developed and sustained. Data was collected through thirty-four site visits utilizing formal and informal interviews, observations, artifact collection, and detailed field notes. Characteristics that were associated with a successful rural school collaborative partnership include life experiences, personality, a willingness to change, empathy, trust and confidentiality, respect, and persistence. The partnership was also impacted by personal and professional needs, many of which were rural in context. The findings present a nuanced look inside a rural school collaborative partnership.

Key Words: rural schools, collaboration, academic coaching, professional isolation, rural school family

Professional development in rural schools has historically been a matter of local capacity-building (Best & Cohen, 2014; Howley & Howley, 2005). Seasoned educators helped newly hired teachers, and informal teacher collaboration was not unusual. These dynamics persist today. For example, in their study of rural school consolidation, Howley and Howley (2004) found that the small size of a rural school's staff often promotes close relationships, which encourage teachers to work collaboratively in a natural way to improve instruction. Given the close relationships between teachers in rural schools and shared understanding of cultural meanings (Howley & Howley, 2004, 2005), embedded staff development such as academic coaching presents a logical model of staff development for rural schools. As rural schools have characteristics that create distinctions from suburban and urban schools, it is reasonable to infer that a rural school collaborative partnership would be impacted by considerations unique to rurality. However, a close look at collaborative partnerships that are developed and sustained in rural settings is underrepresented in the research literature.

This article reports findings from a single case study of a partnership that developed between an academic coach, Ms. Megan Paugh, and fifth grade teacher, Mr. Isaac Lee², both employed in a rural Appalachian school district. An examination of the partnership that developed between Ms. Paugh and

Mr. Lee offers a previously unreported look inside a collaborative partnership in a rural school setting. The characteristics identified and discussed in the findings present new data about the numerous ways that a rural school collaborative partnership is discrete from partnerships in other settings. The findings inform future discussions about rural school professional development and collaborative practices. The purpose of this manuscript is to describe the characteristics of a successful rural school collaborative partnership and to discuss the characteristics' implications for collaborative work in rural settings. In order to frame the collaborative partnership presented, a careful review of the existing research is important.

Review of the Literature

Educator Collaboration and the Rural Context

In a three-year qualitative study, researchers Chance and Segura (2009) studied teacher practices and behaviors in a rural high school to see why the school sustained improvement over a five year period. The researchers determined that collaboration was at the heart of the improvement process, concluding that the small size of the staff and the close relationships that had existed for years among the staff, families, and students created a familial atmosphere that made collaboration easier (Chance & Segura, 2009). Teachers who live and

² Pseudonyms are used throughout the article.

work in their rural communities feel strongly that their schools are the heart of their communities and consider fellow colleagues part of a large school family (Chance & Segura, 2009; DeYoung, 1995; Howley & Howley, 2004, 2005; Kannapel & DeYoung, 1999). When teachers feel a shared attachment to their rural communities, this allows collaborative partnerships to develop naturally within the daily school practices (Howley & Howley, 2005).

Teachers in rural schools are deeply connected both as a staff and to their communities (DeYoung, 1995; Howley & Howley, 2005). However, in rural Appalachia, distrust of outsiders is well documented (Cooper et al., 2010; Edwards et al., 2006; Seal & Harmon, 1995). Historically, teachers' perception was that outsiders came to Appalachia to make them more like the rest of the world, to improve them, a tactic teachers not only resented but also mistrusted (Cooper et al., 2010; Edwards et al., 2006). As academic coaching is an embedded form of staff development (Driscoll, 2008; Obara, 2010), hiring an academic coach from within theoretically may help rural schools capitalize on close staff relationships and mitigate the challenges associated with outsider distrust, thereby making the most of naturally occurring collaboration.

Academic Coaching – A Collaborative Model

Academic coaching relies heavily on the formation of collaborative partnerships to bring about instructional improvement (Knight, 2005, 2011; Marsh et al., 2008). Curiously, in contemporary studies of school reform one would be hard pressed to find any that did not include a discussion of the benefits of collaboration as a staff development tool for instructional improvement irrespective of locale (Biancarosa, Bryk, & Dexter, 2008; Chance & Segura, 2009; Gajda & Koliba, 2008; Joyce & Showers, 1996). Among the documented benefits of collaborative partnerships are increased student achievement (Biancarosa et al., 2008), additional transfer of staff development concepts and ideas into classroom practices (Joyce & Showers, 1982, 1996), and sustained instructional improvements (Chance & Segura, 2009).

Academic coaching was first proposed as a way to utilize collaboration as a way to increase classroom application of staff development trainings in the early 1980s (Joyce & Showers, 1980, 1981, 1982). Researchers Showers and Joyce (1996) reporting on research conducted in the previous

decade that found that as little as 10% of information presented in staff development trainings actually made it into teachers' instructional plans. However, teachers who engaged in coaching partnerships were more likely to use new ideas and strategies (Showers & Joyce, 1996). Academic coaching, also called peer coaching, change coaching, or collegial coaching, evolved to be called predominantly academic coaching, content coaching, or instructional coaching (Knight, 2009; Marsh et al., 2008; Showers & Joyce, 1996). Coaching rarely looks the same from one school district to the next, and while some districts employ full-time coaches, other coaches still teach in the classroom and perform coaching duties as a part-time function (Marsh et al., 2008; Obara, 2010). Collaboration is a fundamental component of the academic coaching partnership (Knight, 2005, 2011; L'Allier, Elish-Piper, & Bean, 2010; Marsh et al., 2008; Showers & Joyce, 1996).

Characteristics of Successful Collaborative Partnerships

Though researchers seldom use the same terminology to name and describe characteristics of successful collaborative partnerships, some common themes are evident in the literature about such partnerships. As noted above, most of the findings supporting these characteristics come from urban and suburban schools. Are these same characteristics illustrative of effective partnerships in rural schools? Also, are these characteristics manifested similarly in rural schools as compared to other settings? Research to describe how collaborative partnerships evolve and are sustained in rural schools is still needed.

Trust. A collaborative relationship is founded on feelings of mutual trust and respect (Berry, Daughtrey, & Wieder, 2009; da Costa, 1995; L'Allier et al., 2010; Marsh et al., 2008; McCombs & Marsh, 2009). Drawing on data collected from over 1000 teacher surveys and an additional 22 follow-up interviews about teacher collaboration, Berry et al. (2009) found trust to be an essential component of a collaborative partnership. L'Allier et al. (2010) found that the 6 coaches and the 19 teachers with whom they worked cited trust and confidentiality as two essential elements of a successful coaching relationship. To understand the impact of coaching programs, coaches, teachers, principals, and other support staff in 113 middle schools in eight large Florida school districts were surveyed (Marsh et al., 2008). Researchers found that feeling like a math

coach is reporting to school administrators undermines coaching partnerships (March et al., 2008; McCombs & Marsh, 2009).

Co-teaching. As part of their daily work, academic coaches often engage in co-teaching with participating teachers (Hull et al., 2009). This practice exemplifies the embedded staff development model that defines academic coaching and highlights many of the characteristics indicative of successful collaborative partnerships (Knight, 2009). In a report synthesizing the research supported types of co-teaching models, Piechura-Couture, Tichenor, Touchton, Macissac, and Heins (2006) name compatible personalities, a willingness to change instructional practices, and being willing to relinquish control as characteristics that must be present in a successful co-teaching model. Berry et al. (2009) cite compatible personalities as an important contributor to a successful collaborative partnership. Also essential is the need for participants to respect one another's expertise and experience (da Costa, 1995; Knight, 2009; Rice & Pinnegar, 2010).

Persistence. In order to develop a working collaborative relationship, partners must exhibit persistence (Hull et al., 2009). Persistence is directly impacted by a person's self-efficacy, with those perceiving a high level of self-efficacy being more likely to persist in the face of challenges (Bandura, 1997). In the previously mentioned Florida study of literacy coaches, two-thirds of reading and social studies teachers who interacted with coaches believed that the interactions helped them increase their teaching self-efficacy (Marsh et al., 2008). In a qualitative study of third and six grade peer math coaches, Bruce and Ross (2008) found that teachers who engaged in coaching partnerships experienced an increase in self-efficacy. An increase in self-efficacy is one reason that participants may persist in pursuing a collaborative partnership (Bruce & Ross, 2008; Marsh et al., 2008).

Common purpose. Collaborative partnerships also require those involved to hold similar views about the aims of their work, in general and of the partnership, in particular (Gajda & Koliba, 2008). In reflections of becoming a coach, Herll and O'Drobinak (2004) identify process and prioritization as two key components of successful coaching. Process refers to a coach's ability to work with teachers to identify a school's overarching need for coaching, while prioritization is the process of focusing those needs (Herll & O'Drobinak, 2004).

These terms support Gajda and Koliba's (2008) work in evaluating and improving teacher collaboration, in which they explain the need for a shared purpose, calling it "the glue that holds dialogue, decision making, action, and evaluation together" (p. 139).

Methodology

This year-long qualitative study utilized a single case study design. The research was guided by the following questions: What characteristics contribute to the development and sustainment of a rural school collaborative partnership? How do rural school dynamics impact collaborative partnerships? What motivates participants to continue collaborative partnerships? Case study research is valuable for both its uniqueness and commonality (Stake, 1995).

Researcher's Role

Recognizing that there was very little available information about collaboration in rural schools, in the spring of 2010, I contacted 14 rural school principals to request an opportunity to talk with their teachers about collaboration with colleagues. From this initial outreach, three principals invited me to attend a staff meeting. At two of the schools, I discovered that while several teachers were willing to speak with me, they did not present examples of rich collaborative partnerships. At Mining Hills Public Schools, I recognized that Ms. Megan Paugh, as a math coach, made collaboration a primary focus of her work, making her an excellent choice as a main participant. As the year progressed, Mr. Isaac Lee, a fifth grade teacher who developed a collaborative partnership with Ms. Paugh, was also identified as a main participant. An examination of their interactions provided a deep look inside a rural school collaborative partnership, and the single case model allowed for close and prolonged study.

I am from a rural area myself, and I believe that, in part, my easy familiarity with the setting and shared experiences with the participants allowed me both initial and continued accessibility to each school I visited. Given my background in rural schools, bias stemming from my personal cultural lens was a distinct possibility, and my interpretations of comments or situations may have been influenced by my own experiences in rural schools. It is also possible that the reflective nature of my interview questions might have spurred additional reflection in the participants, thereby influencing the partnership.

These considerations were ever present in my mind, during both data collection and analysis. In order to control for this, I carefully positioned myself between the roles of participant and observer. Though I participated in friendly conversation with participants before and after data collection sessions, I never engaged during planning sessions or co-taught lessons. I also invited multiple readers to offer viewpoints on my data collection instruments and initial analyses of the data.

Research Site

Mining Hills Public School District, located in rural northern Appalachia, is rich in many ways that are difficult to quantify. When one visits the school, it is readily obvious that the staff is a highly connected one. Relationships between staff members and students' families are interconnected and provide support on many levels, both socially and academically. Outside of school hours, staff members regularly attend students' sporting events and are often spotted at local restaurants, shops, or places of worship. The landscape surrounding Mining Hills is a treasure trove of natural beauty with rolling hills, thickly wooded forests, and rocky outcrops.

The school district is small, with just one elementary and middle school housed in the same building and one high school in a separate building. During the 2010-2011 school year, the school employed approximately 45 teachers and had an enrollment of 871 students or about 67 students per grade level. Nearly 65% of students received free/reduced lunches and about 25% of the study body received special education services. Though the district was economically diverse, it was 98.8% Caucasian in racial makeup. At the time this research was conducted, the school had not met Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) for the past six years and had also spent several years on academic watch, as reported by the state's Department of Education.

Participants

Ms. Megan Paugh. Ms. Paugh grew up in a small, rural town about 45 minutes from Mining Hills and attended a small liberal arts school for her undergraduate degree. During her senior year of college, Ms. Paugh student taught at an extremely rural mission school located deep in the Appalachian mountains of a bordering state, an experience that

cemented her desire to teach in a rural school after graduation. During the 2010-2011 school year, Ms. Paugh took over as a first year math coach expected to serve all grades in Mining Hills. Previously, Ms. Paugh was the district's 8th grade math teacher for several years, where she quickly established herself as the resident math expert and an involved community member. Ms. Paugh was excited, but also nervous, about her new position as math coach because she knew that her success depended largely on developing and sustaining collaborative partnerships.

Mr. Isaac Lee. Mr. Lee was raised in the township where Mining Hills is located. He attended and graduated from the school himself, a practice not uncommon for rural school teachers (Monk, 2007). Mr. Lee described a feeling of closeness with his students because he shared their experience of growing up in a rural environment. "There may be more poverty, but you're closer to them. You can see what their experience is. I myself went to rural schools, so I know what they're going through." Mr. Lee's first teaching job was at Mining Hills, where he has since spent his entire teaching career. After eight years as technology teacher, during in the 2010-11 school year, Mr. Lee found himself back in a self-contained fifth grade classroom. During an early year interview he said, "I've been a technology teacher for so long, to go right back into regular education, I need all the help I can get." Due to a high level of anxiety about teaching math, Mr. Lee was excited about the possibility of working with Ms. Paugh.

Data Collection

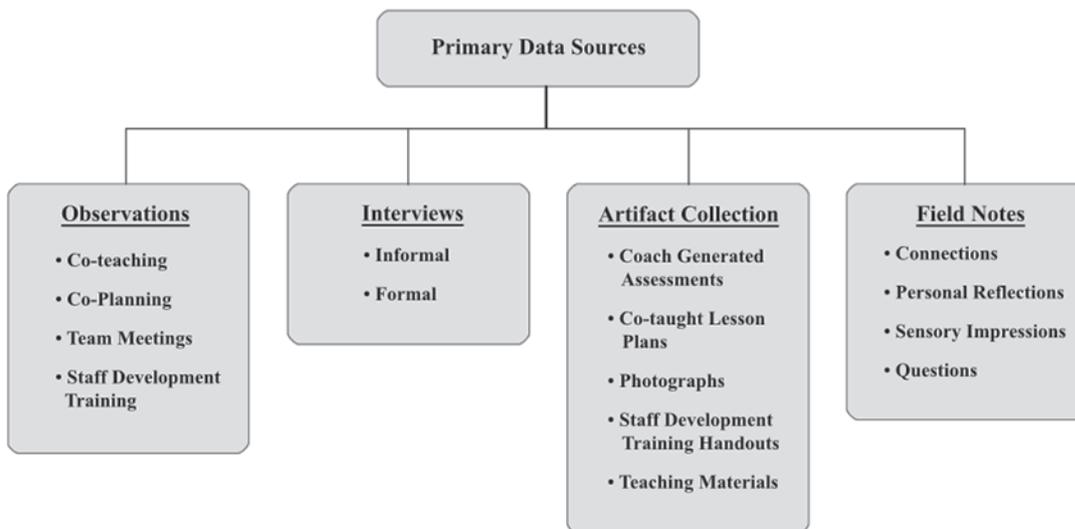
Data was collected through thirty-four site visits during the 2010-2011 school year at Mining Hills Public School. Site visits began the first week of school and continued until the last week. Informal and formal interviews, observations, artifact collection, and detailed field notes were utilized to collect data. More than twelve informal interviews and six formal interviews were conducted with Ms. Paugh. Mr. Lee was informally interviewed six times and formally interviewed three times. Three interviews were conducted with Ms. Paugh and Mr. Lee together. They were observed co-teaching four times, co-planning twelve times, during six team meetings, and throughout two coach-led staff development trainings. On a nearly weekly, sometimes bi-weekly basis, I observed the participants while they worked together. In order to

flesh out feelings, opinions, and to fully understand interactions, formal and informal interviews took place in response to these observations. All interviews and observations were audio-recorded and transcribed. As recommended by Creswell (1998), the greatest effort was made to keep detailed field notes describing the physical setting, sequence of events, and the subtleties that were not apparent through audio recordings. The specific amount of time spent with each participant varied greatly from week to week in response to instructional needs and the availability of the coach. As a result, the breakdown of time spent on each data collection method and with each participant was challenging to quantify.

Data Analysis

Due to the tremendous amount of narrative text that was collected, Creswell's (1998) guidelines regarding data management were employed to create files so that data could be organized as it was collected. Data was initially organized in files labeled observations, interviews, field notes, and artifact collection. Within those categories, data was further organized and multiple groupings were created (see Figures 1 and 2). Reading of the data happened often and repeatedly and copious notes were taken to further organization; it was necessary to create a coding system for easier and more reliable analysis. The coding system was inductive and was created by the lead researcher using a method of categorical aggregation that allowed for patterns and multiple instances of data to be more readily identified (Creswell, 1998).

Figure 1. File Organization



Direct interpretation and the development of naturalistic generalizations were part of the data analysis process. Some instances occurred only once, yet were important enough to warrant further analysis. An example of this occurred during Mr. Lee's discussion of growing up in a small town. His statement, "They already have a preconceived idea of who you are, but it may not actually be who you are," was a statement unique to his life, but was nevertheless significant in an analysis of the impact the rural context had on the research findings. The meaning applied to an instance like this can be

applied to naturalistic generalizations (Creswell, 1998; Stake, 1995). Called reflective analysis by Gall, Borg, and Gall (1996), at times personal intuition and judgment were necessary to identify patterns and important elements in the data. Utilizing reflective analysis, it was important to examine the data multiple times to identify pieces of information that were connected. Data was triangulated using methodological triangulation (Stake, 1995). For example, observation of a co-taught lesson or planning session provided a first data source. Secondly, the participants of the observation were

interviewed alone, and thirdly, they were interviewed together. This allowed for multiple perspectives on

the same event, providing an important way to validate the research.

Figure 2. Small Excerpt of Coded Data Involving Collaboration

Participant Responses	Definition	Challenges	Positives	Characteristics	Rural Connection
"A group of people working together for the same end. Same result."	D		P		
"It's a give and a take. That you're not walking in as the expert. That it's a partnership and you share the ideas."	D		P	CH	
"You get to see different styles of teaching, different ways of doing things, differentiated in eighty different ways. Her strengths are my weaknesses, her weaknesses are my strengths. It's all intertwined."			P	CH	
"But it's not always been easy to collaborate 'cause we didn't have the time or the money. Even just scheduling kids to be away at their specials. If there, there were a lot of times when only one sixth grade teacher would be free. One class could go to art or music or gym. You couldn't have, there weren't enough teachers to have all three groups going, so you didn't necessarily have common planning time."		C			R
"Teachers in a rural setting have always done it, but normally it came outside of the normal workday or on those occasional labor/professional days. Then you just get a mouthful of it, a ton of it when you can only see one another once every three months."		C			R
"I think knowing how, being able to see how they learn. Who can you push or who you're gonna have to take the baby steps with because if you throw too much at them, just like kids, they're gonna get overwhelmed, shut down. So just kind of being able to work with them, help them out, be flexible, get to know them as a learner."		C		CH	
"There was a flexibility there. There was an understanding there that was, I'm listening to you."			P	CH	
"I think the respect and everybody doing an equal amount of work. It's not really collaborative if one person ends up doing it all. So just kind of balanced, respectful, and trusting."	D			CH	
"Getting used to what they find acceptable with classroom environment and stuff like that. So, if a student asks me to use the bathroom, I never answer. Some teachers like it quiet and some teachers don't care if their kids are roaming around the room. Have to be incredibly flexible and not judgmental."		C		CH	
"I think we honestly want the best for the kids, and we know their experiences are limited."				CH	R

Findings

A Closer Look at the Development of the Partnership

For the purposes of this case study, a successful partnership was identified by a desire to continue the partnership, the ability of the participants to identify positive outcomes arising as a result of their collaborative efforts, and a shared vision between the participants (Gajda & Koliba, 2008; Herll & O'Drobinak, 2004). Starting early and continuing throughout the year, Mr. Lee invited Ms. Paugh to become involved in strengthening his instructional pacing, planning, and delivery. This work led to a partnership that was supportive to both participants and which fulfilled their personal and professional needs. Ms. Paugh said of their working together, "Mr. Lee is able to just pick up when I think, 'Okay, I'm talking too much. Your turn.' I don't feel like the lesson jerks around." As the year came to a close,

they were asked to delve into what made the partnership work. The characteristics that emerged are a compilation of their responses along with data collected throughout the year from numerous observations and interviews.

Life experiences. Ms. Paugh and Mr. Lee had several important life experiences in common that helped their collaborative partnership be sustainable. Though not from the same community, both were from small, Appalachian communities and attended rural schools. Consequently, they had some shared life experiences that helped to create an early common bond. This shared experience, called situated learning by Howley and Howley (2005), supports the notion that Ms. Paugh and Mr. Lee were likely influenced by cultural meanings due to their shared experiences in a rural environment. This included an attachment to place (Howley & Howley, 2005), to which both participants clearly expressed strong committed feelings. Ms. Paugh described this feeling well during an early year interview.

I can't imagine going anywhere else and having the staff like this. We're close. We get along. If something happens to someone, like when Mary's mom was really sick and she was in the hospital, everybody was concerned. And my opinion is that if you were at a much larger school, you're not going to have such an outreach, a concern.

They both expressed an understanding of how small schools worked, how the community was structured, and a shared belief about how important it was to understand their students. They were both familiar with the interconnectedness of families in the district and understood the deeply rooted, multi-generational poverty that the area experienced.

Gajda and Koliba's (2008) work on teacher collaboration identified the need for a common purpose between partners. Mr. Lee reiterated this need and placed it within a rural school context when he said, "The two people in the room have got to be on common ground," and "In a rural school, it is really important that we understand the kids and what they are dealing with in their lives. Without this, we might not use the best ways to teach them." Both participants understood that their students rarely left the county, that their first time on an escalator was usually during their 8th grade trip to Washington, D.C., and were not surprised to hear that a 6th grade girl had never tried on clothing in a dressing room before. As emphasized by both participants, "People from the outside don't always understand the culture and the kids." The importance of these shared experiences and common knowledge of the region and culture should not be underestimated in relevance to their working relationship.

Personality. To ensure the best collaborative experience possible, the compatibility of the partners must be considered (Berry et al., 2009; Piechura-Couture et al., 2006). This is particularly important when collaborative partners are engaged in co-teaching (Piechura-Couture et al., 2006), a practice that Ms. Paugh and Mr. Lee utilized often throughout the year. Said Ms. Paugh, "Our personalities just click, and we can bounce off of each other. Our ideas just flow." Ms. Paugh and Mr. Lee's personalities were not alike at all to a casual observer. Ms. Paugh was full of energy and out-going while Mr. Lee was warm and friendly but somewhat reserved. Ms. Paugh described herself as prone to anxiety, while Mr. Lee was calm and laid-back. Ms. Paugh was

highly organized, her desk did not have a paper out of place, and she preferred to plan in advance. In contrast, Mr. Lee's desk looked like the aftermath of a paper explosion, and he was often still tweaking his plans moments before a lesson began. This is not to suggest that one was more professional than the other, just that their work styles and personalities appeared to be very different. Though their personalities were not alike, they were compatible, which helped to facilitate a healthy partnership.

Willingness to change. Mr. Lee demonstrated an essential willingness to change his instructional practices. Without this, it is reasonable to infer that Ms. Paugh would have felt greater frustration in working with him, which would likely have impacted the sustainment of the partnership. A willingness to change is an important characteristic of collaborative co-teaching models (Piechura-Couture et al., 2006). Interestingly, an examination of this characteristic in a rural setting revealed findings specifically related to rurality.

Data point to Mr. Lee's view as Ms. Paugh as an insider within the school and community as one reason that he was willing to accept her suggestions for instructional change. The economic depression experienced in rural Appalachia is frequently stereotyped in a way that portrays unflattering images of the region's people and culture, creating a deep-seeded mistrust of anyone not from the community (Edwards, Ashbury, & Cox, 2006; Seal & Harmon, 1995). Seal and Harmon (1995) speak of rural Appalachian people's mistrust of outsiders saying, "They also view with great suspicion outsiders who promise rural folks can be more or have more, if they embrace the opportunities of change" (p. 4). Many teachers at Mining Hills throughout the year reported their general distrust of people who come to the school to tell them they how to become better teachers. Said Ms. Paugh, "Well, especially here, rural school in Appalachia, we don't like our outsiders. These are people who don't live in the Mining Hills district. If you live even 15 minutes away, you are probably an outsider." Mr. Lee described a time that a state reading consultant visited his classroom with great distress. The consultant stopped him in the middle of the lesson in front of his students to announce that he was teaching the material the wrong way and proceeded to explain the right way to teach the lesson. Feeling belittled and inferior, he said, "I don't know that this is a really productive way of explaining this to me, you know? I just kind of scooted away." Asked if he

would welcome an outsider such as the reading consultant in his classroom again, he responded with a resounding, “No, I am happier teaching on my own.” Mr. Lee viewed Ms. Paugh as an integral part of both the school and community, which impacted his willingness to embrace the changes she suggested and certainly contributed to their partnership.

Empathy. Though empathy is a trait teachers have been trying to instill in their students since the start of education (Garrett & Greenwalt, 2010), missing from the research literature is the importance of empathy between educators engaging in successful collaborations. Despite this, it seems intuitive that the ability to show empathy is an essential collaborative characteristic.

Ms. Paugh and Mr. Lee provided empathy to one another throughout the year. From the beginning, Ms. Paugh was cognizant that Mr. Lee was new to his position and was struggling with all new content. He said, “To try to be an expert in all subjects, especially first year, is tough.” Ms. Paugh nodded her head vigorously to show she understood. Mr. Lee noticed and appreciated this saying, “She was always willing to listen, to be there for me.” On the other hand, Mr. Lee also provided empathy when Ms. Paugh needed it most. Several times, she was observed confiding to him that she was frustrated by the way her position was being utilized. He was noted as an active listener who expressed compassion for her experiences. The empathy they provided one another contributed significantly to the sustainment of their partnership.

Trust and confidentiality. The interpersonal workings of a rural school are different than urban or suburban schools (DeYoung, 1995; Gjelten, 1982; Howley & Howley, 2005). Rural schools are identified as highly connected to their social settings and relationships between the school staff and community are interconnected (Chance & Segura, 2009; DeYoung, 1995; Howley & Howley 2005). The ability to trust and know that what happens between two people will stay confidential is perhaps one of the most important characteristics of a collaborative partnership (Berry et al., 2009; Chance & Segura, 2009; da Costa, 1995; Hull et al., 2009; L’Allier et al., 2010). In a rural school this is even more important, because teachers know that news travels fast, not only among the staff but also in the community. Of Mining Hills Ms. Paugh said, “We all know gossip can fly through a staff like a wildfire, and it’s even worse here.” She believed gossip was worse in a small school because it did not stay in

school, but also traveled very quickly from the school to the community. Without trust and confidentiality, collaboration in a setting such as this was unlikely to occur, as the risk of large-scale embarrassment from leaked information within a small staff and community was high.

Chance and Segura (2009) concluded in their rural high school case study that trust may be easier to build among a small, highly connected rural staff, but it does not guarantee that the trust needed for collaborative relationships will happen. By mid-year and again at the end of the year, both participants agreed that a high level of trust had developed between them and felt that it was a significant contributor in their success together. To emphasize this Mr. Lee said, “I don’t need the whole town to know if I have a bad day or if a lesson doesn’t go well.” This mutual trust was essential for collaboration, especially in their rural setting.

Respect. Teachers in rural schools are often expected to share resources (Franklin, 2012). The sharing of Ms. Paugh’s and Mr. Lee’s individual strengths with each other gave each participant a professional credibility that allowed them to work in the partnership as equals. Mutual respect is a critical component of a collaborative partnership, especially influencing co-planning and co-teaching dynamics (da Costa, 1995; Rice & Pinnegar, 2010). From the beginning, Mr. Lee respected Ms. Paugh’s knowledge of all things connected to mathematics. During a co-planning discussion about pacing, Ms. Paugh asked, “How many days do you think you’re going to spend on mean, median and range?” Mr. Lee responded, “At rough guess, I would say two weeks. Rough guess. Is that too short or too long?” Ms. Paugh said, “I’m thinking too long. Because technically by the end of the first nine weeks, you should have all the graphs done, too.” Mr. Lee agreed, “Yes, that’s true. I need to speed that up a little bit.”

Ms. Paugh respected Mr. Lee too, which was critical to the success of the partnership. For mutual respect between educators to develop, it is not necessary for teachers to have expertise in each other’s subject areas (da Costa, 1995). While Ms. Paugh took the lead on math instruction, she valued Mr. Lee’s knowledge of technology. Speaking about his knowledge of technology in a rural school she said:

We don’t have a lot of people here who know about technology. I actually know more than a

lot of people, and I don't know nearly what he does. Without his help, I don't really know who I would ask.

In rural schools with a small number of teachers representing each content area, the issue of professional isolation may be especially concerning (Howley & Howley, 2005; Monk, 2007). The sharing of valuable resources in a rural setting fostered mutual respect, which contributed meaningfully to the partnership between Ms. Paugh and Mr. Lee.

Persistence. In order to succeed in their coaching endeavors, coaches must persist (Hull et al., 2009). Ms. Paugh and Mr. Lee faced several challenges throughout the year, yet still persisted to improve Mr. Lee's classroom instruction. During an interview, they reflected on a co-taught lesson that took most of four days to complete due to many unforeseen interruptions. Ms. Paugh asserted, "It was a little disjointed. And then, not that I can control it, but all the lovely distractions in and out of the room." Mr. Lee commented, "Normally, it's a little more fluid, more staying with one topic all the way through. Some of it didn't go as well as I hoped."

The four-day lesson also illuminates a challenge unique to the rural setting that required persistence. Ms. Paugh commented:

I was in Mr. Lee's room for four days, which meant that I couldn't see anybody else's math classes for four days because they all teach math at the same time. If I help one teacher, I can't help that grade level again that day.

The schedule at Mining Hills due to its small staff was a source of many frustrations for the whole staff, not just its math coach. Ms. Paugh and Mr. Lee reiterated to me frequently throughout the year that there was absolutely no flexibility in their schedules, making co-teaching and planning extremely difficult. "We're locked in," she explained. Due to the small number of teachers teaching each subject and carefully scheduled exploratory and lunch schedules, both Ms. Paugh and Mr. Lee had to creatively manage their time so as to persist in co-teaching and co-planning together. Teachers in rural schools often face this type of professional isolation (Howley & Howley, 2005; Monk, 2007). Ms. Paugh and Mr. Lee's persistence, despite obstacles they faced, contributed to the success of the partnership.

Motivations for Sustaining the Partnership

In addition to the essential characteristics outlined in the previous section, Ms. Paugh and Mr. Lee's work together was impacted by professional and personal motivations. Since a majority of the motivations were impacted by the rural context, this makes them significant.

Ms. Paugh's Motivation. Ms. Paugh had pride in her knowledge and skills as a math teacher and felt well respected and valued both by the staff and within the rural community. These feelings were tied inextricably to her self-efficacy as an academic coach and feeling of self-worth within rural Mining Hills' small school staff and the surrounding community. During the screening of research sites, the principal at Mining Hills proudly pulled from the wall a paper detailing the state achievement scores of Ms. Paugh's students, excited about what was clearly a high spot in the district's chronically low scores. In her new position as coach, Ms. Paugh felt a significant amount of pressure related to her role as a math expert in the district, a feeling she spoke about in relation to her previous year's test scores. "Do you know the pressure on me after conquering half of the region with my scores? Oh, yeah, that's fun." In order to feel successful as coach, Ms. Paugh very much wanted to cultivate positive coaching relationships with the teachers at Mining Hills. Failing to do so would be not only a professional failure but, in the rural school setting, also a devastating personal one. Consequently, when Mr. Lee was eager to utilize her help in improving his instruction, she jumped at the chance to be successful in her new position.

Like coaches in other school settings (Bruce & Ross, 2008; Marsh et al., 2008), Ms. Paugh reported an increase in her coaching self-efficacy due to her partnership with Mr. Lee. In an end of the year interview, she described her perception of herself as an academic coach by saying, "I'm more confident, more comfortable, and feel more like a math leader." Her work with Mr. Lee helped to increase her coaching self-efficacy, which provided strong motivation for her to persist in cultivating their collaborative work together. In rural Mining Hills, where professional success was connected to personal life, an increase in self-efficacy helped Ms. Paugh feel more successful in her position, thus motivating her to continue the partnership. Mr. Lee also had his own reasons for welcoming their work together.

Mr. Lee's Motivation. Mr. Lee reflected several times that having an audience in his room made him feel energized and motivated. Quite significantly he shared, "I've had the principal in here. I've had other teachers in here. I like it. I like it a lot. I really love the audience." Like many rural schools, Mining Hills had one principal, no vice-principal or other administrators, in charge of evaluating teachers. The principal had very little time to visit teachers' classrooms to observe classroom instructional practices or to offer feedback. Consequently, in a rural school, where there was very little attention for individual teachers, Ms. Paugh's feedback and continued attention was a motivating factor for Mr. Lee to nurture their partnership.

Mr. Lee was a longtime resident and native of the Mining Hills School District. Very few people did not know him or know of his family. When asked about the best and worst things working in a rural school he replied:

The best thing is that I know everyone. And that is also the worst thing. It's awesome that I went to school with some of these people, went to high school with them. Some of these people were my teachers. So that's awesome in the fact that I've known them for so long.

While he saw this as positive, it could also be frustrating. Others thought they knew everything about him, and that there was nothing new to know. "They have this preconceived idea of who you are. But it may not actually be who you are." He described that people grow and mature, but if someone has known you their whole life, they may never notice those changes. While being with a staff that you have known nearly your whole life may give the comfort of familiarity and stability, it may also feel personally and professionally limiting. Mangin's (2005) study of teacher leaders documented that sometimes having preconceived ideas about a person can negatively impact the collaborative process. This is something with which staff members in a rural school cope regularly, though how many of them recognize the paradigm is unknown. Ms. Paugh's involvement in his life offered a chance for Mr. Lee to remake himself, without preconceived ideas of his past. Even though he had nothing to hide, this represented a rare opportunity in a rural school. Personal and professional needs were an important contributor to Ms. Paugh and Mr. Lee's rural school partnership.

Discussion

The collaborative partnership between Ms. Paugh and Mr. Lee provides insight to the inner workings of a rural school collaborative partnership that have yet to be studied and reported. Though many of the characteristics described in the study's findings may be used to describe successful partnerships in other locations (Berry et al., 2009; da Costa, 1995; Gajda & Koliba, 2008; L'Allier et al., 2010; Piechura-Couture et al., 2006), the findings present a nuanced look at the ways the characteristics were impacted by considerations unique to rurality.

Research supports the necessity of teachers in all settings expressing understanding and empathy for their students' cultural experiences (Gajda & Koliba, 2008; Howley & Howley, 2005; Kraft, Papay, Charner-Laird, Ng, & Reinhorn, 2012). In Ms. Paugh and Mr. Lee's partnership, however, the value of shared life experiences was heightened by their rural attachment to place. Shared life experiences created an important attachment to place that aided Ms. Paugh in developing and sustaining a collaborative partnership with Mr. Lee. Related to place, in rural Appalachia, outsiders have historically been perceived as bringers of forced change (Cooper et al., 2010; Edwards et al., 2006; Seal & Harmon, 1995), a sentiment that was reinforced by the participants. That Ms. Paugh was considered a community insider likely garnered more of a willingness from Mr. Lee to try new things. Community engagement is especially important in rural areas, and teachers in rural schools are expected to become involved in their school's community (Howley & Howley, 2004, 2005; Kannapel & DeYoung, 1999). With this expectation, a fear of community embarrassment and the blurred lines between professional and personal lives made trust and confidentiality extremely important to both Ms. Paugh and Mr. Lee. If either participant shared confidential information, there was a real likelihood that the information would spread to the community, potentially causing both professional and personal embarrassment. Teachers in other locations do not experience this extreme blurring of personal and professional lives, and consequently, teachers in rural schools have a heightened need for trust and confidentiality. Due to Mining Hills' small staff, professional isolation presented additional rural considerations. Mr. Lee was Mining Hills' only technology expert, and Ms. Paugh relied on him for technology assistance; just as he depended on Ms.

Paugh's knowledge for all things related to math instruction. This rural school paradigm allowed mutual respect to develop between the participants. While persistence was identified as important in all collaborative partnerships, the rural setting at Mining Hills was influenced by professional isolation, requiring that both participants exert considerable effort to persist in the partnership.

Impoverished districts in all settings often have a higher population of students with troubled home lives, and teachers who stay in these schools are dedicated to their students and school (Howley & Howley, 2004; Kraft et al., 2012; Maring & Koblinsky, 2013; Monk, 2007). Ms. Paugh and Mr. Lee's dedication and care for their students' academic success and personal well-being was well documented throughout the year, yet both also revealed personal and professional motivations to continue the partnership that were outside the scope of improved student outcomes. Though research corroboration is unavailable, it is reasonable to infer that teachers in other locations are similarly motivated by both personal and professional needs. Nevertheless, the motivations experienced by Ms. Paugh and Mr. Lee were distinctly impacted by considerations unique to rurality. For example, Ms. Paugh's personal and professional motivations were nearly all motivated by characteristics that describe rural settings. Her need for professional approval extended beyond the walls of the school and into the community, a motivation produced by the strong connection between school and community in Mining Hills. Mr. Lee loved working with people he had known his whole life, but also felt that people's opinions of him were influenced by their knowledge of him as a child and adolescent, a situation that felt personally limiting as an adult. It is unlikely that teachers in suburban or urban schools face such concerns. Principals in all locations spend considerable time on teacher evaluations (National Association of Secondary School Principals, 2014). However, because principals in rural schools are often the lone administrator (Wood, Finch, & Mirecki, 2013), evaluations may dominate their time, leaving little time to interact with teachers on a daily basis (Schimel, 2014). This supports Mr. Lee's personal need for the company that Ms. Paugh's coaching provided and highlights once again how the participants' motivations to sustain the partnership were impacted by the rural context.

As was previously mentioned, many of the characteristics presented in this case study are also

important in partnerships occurring in other school locations (Berry et al., 2009; da Costa, 1995; Gajda & Koliba, 2008; L'Allier et al., 2010; Piechura-Couture et al., 2006). Yet, while commonalities exist, the rural context impacted many of the characteristics. For example, much like rural schools, urban school staff dynamics foster close relationships and staff members respond most favorably to those considered insiders (Brown & Benken, 2009; Kraft, et al., 2012). However, though urban school teachers report close staff connections (Brown & Benken, 2009; Kraft et al., 2012), teachers in impoverished urban areas cite safety concerns about their school's community, which often prevent them from becoming actively involved in the community (Kraft et al., 2012; Maring & Koblinsky, 2013). Given much more community anonymity than rural school teachers, educators in urban and suburban schools do not have the same anxieties about school life spilling over into personal life, creating different needs for trust and confidentiality. Also, while impoverished schools in both rural and urban schools are often underfunded, requiring teachers to share resources (Franklin, 2012; Kraft et al., 2012), professional isolation at Mining Hills created sharing dynamics that impacted respect and persistence. As professional isolation is a characteristic unique to rural schools (Howley & Howley, 2005; Monk, 2007), considerations such as these are unlikely to be found in non-rurally located schools.

For stakeholders interested in utilizing embedded staff development, such as academic coaching, this case study provides a previously unreported look inside a rural school collaborative partnership. Rural considerations significantly impacted the study's findings, informing existing literature about the nature of collaborative partnerships and their effectiveness and providing new data about the many ways that a rural school collaborative partnership is different from partnerships in other settings. The study provides new insight for implementing rural school professional development and improving rural school collaborative practices.

Implications

This case study presented a viable model for embedded staff development in a rural school and suggests that the model could also be effective in other rural schools. Developing and maintaining a

collaborative partnership in a rural school was influenced by seven characteristics, five of which were impacted by considerations specific to rurality. Characteristics directly influenced by rurality include life experiences, willingness to change, trust and confidentiality, respect, and persistence. Two other characteristics, personality and empathy, while not directly linked to rurality, were important considerations in the development and sustainment of the rural school partnership detailed in this case study. An absence of any of the characteristics may have disrupted the development or sustainment of the partnership. Further evidence of how successful partnerships in rural schools are formed and sustained, as well as exploring their defining characteristics, is needed.

While all of the characteristics presented were important in the sustainment of the partnership, when encouraging partnerships between an academic coach and teachers, administrators in rural schools should pay particular attention to several considerations. In a rural setting, attachment to place should be expected to impact shared experiences and common purpose. As a result, participants should be encouraged to identify shared experiences and to develop a common purpose. Administrators should carefully consider the designation of each partner as insider or outsider and recognize its role in a participant's willingness to make instructional changes. In addition, they should be aware of the impact that professional isolation plays in rural school collaborative partnerships, and may find that academic coaches are helpful in mitigating its effects. Significantly, administrators need to be aware of the

heightened need for trust within rural school partnerships and when choosing an academic coach, should select a coach with the capacity to closely hold confidences. As the rural setting was integrally connected to the personal and professional needs identified in this case study, this is a particularly important rural perspective to consider.

Administrators should also take into account the impact of personal and professional needs when facilitating the formation of a rural school collaborative partnership and when evaluating the successes or challenges of a partnership.

Establishing a further connection between rural school collaborative partnerships and the fulfillment of personal and professional needs presents an area for future inquiry.

Finally, this case study implies that a researcher who has experience with the region and participants has greater access to qualitative data. Though the researcher may not be considered an insider, familiarity with the region may encourage participants to be less guarded with their beliefs and feelings (White & Corbett, 2014). In addition, a deep understanding of this partnership was unlikely without a commitment to a collecting data for the entire school year. For researchers in rural schools, increasing both the frequency of school visits and the length of the study will likely yield additional trust from the participants, resulting in greater depth in the data. Much like the natural resources that are concealed beneath Mining Hills' rolling topography, for qualitative researchers in rural areas, a commitment to place and participants gives the best opportunity for fruitful discoveries.

References

- Bandura, A. (1997). Self-efficacy. *Harvard Mental Health Letter*, 13(9), 4. Best, J., & Cohen, C. (2014). Rural education: Examining capacity challenges that influence educator effectiveness (Policy brief). Denver, CO: McREL International.
- Berry, B., Daughtrey, A., Wieder, A., & Center for Teaching Quality. (2009). Collaboration: Closing the effective teaching gap. *Center for Teaching Quality*, EBSCOhost (accessed January 30, 2012).
- Biancarosa, G., Bryk, A. S., & Dexter, E. R. (2010). Assessing the value-added effects of literacy collaborative professional development on student learning. *The Elementary School Journal*, 111(1), 7-34.
- Brown, N., & Benken, B. M. (2009). So When Do We Teach Mathematics? Vital Elements of Professional Development for High School Mathematics Teachers in an Urban Context. *Teacher Education Quarterly*, 36(3), 55-73.
- Bruce, C. D., & Ross, J. A. (2008). A model for increasing reform implementation and teacher efficacy: Teacher peer coaching in grades 3 and 6 mathematics. *Canadian Journal of Education*, 31(2), 346-370.
- Chance, P. L., & Segura, S. N. (2009). A rural high school's collaborative approach to school improvement. *Journal of Research in Rural*

- Education (Online)*, 24(5), 1-12.
- Creswell, J. (1998). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five traditions*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- da Costa, J. L. (1995). Teacher collaboration: The roles of trust and respect. Retrieved January 15, 2012 from <http://www.eric.ed.gov/PDFS/ED384607.pdf>
- DeYoung, A. J. (1987). The status of American rural education research: An integrated review and commentary. *Review of Educational Research* 57(2), 123-148.
- Driscoll, M. J. (2008). Embracing coaching as professional development. *Principal Leadership*, 9(2), 40-44.
- Edwards, G., Asbury, J., & Cox, R. (2006). *A handbook to Appalachia: An introduction to the region*. Knoxville, TN: The University of Tennessee Press.
- Franklin, M. (2012). Wide-open opportunities: Teacher leaders can help rural schools make the most of meager resources. *Journal of Staff Development*, 33(6), 28-31.
- Gajda, R., & Koliba, C. J. (2008). Evaluating and improving the quality of teacher collaboration: A field-tested framework for secondary school leaders. *NASSP Bulletin*, 92(2), 133-153.
- Gall, M., Borg, W., & Gall, J. (1996). *Educational research: An introduction*. White Plains, NY: Longman.
- Garrett, J., & Greenwalt, K. (2010). Confronting the other: Understanding empathy. *Current Issues in Education*, 13(4), 1-29.
- Gjeltén, T. (1982). *A typology of rural school settings*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education.
- Hansen, P. (2009). *Mathematics coaching handbook: Working with teachers to improve instruction*. Larchmont, NY: Eye on Education.
- Hatch, J. A. (2002). *Doing qualitative research in education settings*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.
- Herll, S., & O'Drobinak, B. (2004). Role of the coach: Dream keeper, supporter, friend. *Journal of Staff Development*, 25(2), 42-45.
- Howley, A., & Howley, C. B. (2004). *Small by default and the pressures to consolidate*. Paper presented at the annual conference of the International Society of Educational Planning. Washington, DC.
- Howley, A., & Howley, C. B. (2005). High-quality teaching: Providing for rural teachers' professional development. *Rural Educator*, 26(2), 1-5.
- Hull, T., Balka, D., & Miles, R. (2009). *A guide to mathematics coaching*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.
- Joyce, B., & Showers, B. (1980). Improving inservice training: The message of research. *Educational Leadership*, 37(5), 379.
- Joyce, B. R., & Showers, B. (1981). Transfer of training: The contribution of "coaching." *Journal of Education*, 163(2), 163-172.
- Joyce, B., & Showers, B. (1982). The coaching of teaching. *Educational Leadership*, 40(1), 4.
- Kannapel, P. J., & DeYoung, A. J. (1999). The rural school problem in 1999: A review and critique of the literature. *Journal of Research in Rural Education*, 15(2), 67-7.
- Knight, J. (2005). A primer on instructional coaches. *Principal Leadership*, 5(9), 16-21.
- Knight, J. (2011). What good coaches do. *Educational Leadership*, 69(2), 18-22.
- Knight, J. (2009). Coaching: The key to translating research into practice lies in continuous, job-embedded learning with ongoing support. *Journal of Staff Development*, 30(1), 18-20.
- Kraft, M., Papay, J., Charner-Laird, M., Ng, M., & Reinhorn, S. (2012). Committed to their students but in need of support: How school context influences teacher turnover in high-poverty, urban schools. *Project on the Next Generation of Teachers*. Retrieved on December 20, 2014 from http://scholar.harvard.edu/files/mkraft/files/kraft_papay_charner-laird_johnson_ng_reinhorn_-_teachers_in_high-poverty_urban_schools.pdf
- L'Allier, S., Elish-Piper, L., & Bean, R. M. (2010). What matters for elementary literacy coaching? Guiding principles for instructional improvement and student achievement. *Reading Teacher*, 63(7), 544-554.
- Mangin, M. M. (2005). Distributed leadership and the culture of schools: Teacher leaders' strategies for gaining access to classrooms. *Journal of School Leadership*, 15(4), 456-484.
- Maring, E. F., & Koblinsky, S. A. (2013). Teachers' challenges, strategies, and support needs in schools affected by community violence: A qualitative study. *Journal of School Health*, 83(6), 379-388.
- Marsh, J., McCombs, J., Lockwood, J., Martorell, F., Gershwin, D., Naftel, S., Le, V., Shea, M., Barney, H., & Creco, A. (2008). *Supporting*

- literacy across the sunshine state: A study of Florida middle school reading coaches.* Santa Monica, CA: RAND.
- McCombs, J. S., & Marsh, J. A. (2009). Lessons for boosting the effectiveness of reading coaches. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 90(7), 501-507.
- Monk, D. H. (2007). Recruiting and retaining high-quality teachers in rural areas. *Future of Children*, 17(1), 155-174.
- National Council of Teachers of Mathematics. (2009). *Empowering the mentor of the beginning mathematics teacher*. Reston, VA: Author.
- National Association of Secondary School Principals & National Association of Elementary School Principals. (2014). Supporting principals in implementing teacher evaluation systems. [Blog]. Retrieved on December 20, 2014 from nasspblogs.org/principalspolicy/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/13-465-AD_JointAdvocacyBriefing_rnd5_2.11.14.pdf
- Obara, S. (2010). Mathematics coaching: A new kind of professional development. *Teacher Development*, 14(2), 241-251.
- Piechura-Couture, K., Tichenor, M., Touchton, D., Macissac, D., & Heins, E. D. (2006). Coteaching: A model for education reform. *Principal Leadership*, 6(9), 39-43.
- Rice, M. & Pinnegar, S. (2010). Organic collaboration: sustaining teachers and teacher educators in the cottage industry of curriculum making. *Teachers and Teaching*. 16(4), 373-387.
- Schimel, K. (2014). For rural districts, unexpected challenges in new evaluation system. *Chalkbeat Colorado*. Retrieved on December 20, 2014 from co.chalkbeat.org/2014/02/10/for-rural-districts-unexpected-challenges-in-new-evaluation-system/
- Seal, K. R., & Harmon, H. L. (1995). Realities of rural school reform. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 77(2), 119.
- Showers, B., & Joyce, B. R. (1996). The evolution of peer coaching. *Educational Leadership*, 53(6), 12-16.
- Stake, R. E. (1995). *The art of case study research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Walther-Thomas, C. (1997). Co-teaching experiences: The benefits and problems that teachers and principals report over time. *Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 30(4), 395-407.
- White, S., & Corbett, M. (2014). *Doing educational research in rural settings: Methodological issues, international perspectives and practical solutions*. Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon; New York : Routledge, 2014.
- Wood, J. N., Finch, K., & Mirecki, R. M. (2013). If We Get You, How Can We Keep You? Problems with Recruiting and Retaining Rural Administrators. *Rural Educator*, 34(2).

About the author:

Dr. Hartman has a Ph.D. in Teaching, Curriculum & Learning from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and is an Assistant Professor of Early Childhood Education in the Gladys W. and David H. Patton College of Education at Ohio University.