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### Schools, Communities, and Teachers: How Rural Sense of Belonging Holds Impact for English Teachers in Place

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#### Abstract

This paper examines how English teachers experience and articulate a rural sense of belonging (RSOB) while teaching and living in rural communities. Given that rurality is a social construct, teachers' inclusion in this study occurred through meeting nuanced rural criteria. RSOB is a relationship people have with rurality that helps English teachers consider how they experience and feel about their work and lives in place. This study adds complexity to dynamic RSOB by attending to affective intensities associated with teachers' daily interactions across ruralities. Data include survey responses from 30 participating teachers with varied experience, in rural schools within the United States. Using a narrative methodology, authors analyse teachers' stories, invested in how their experiences living and teaching rural shapes their work as English teachers. Findings focus on how (if) participants self-identify as rural English teachers and/or rural community members, how participants experience teaching, and how participants navigate schools and communities. Findings offer a richer understanding of how English teachers persist or depart in rural spaces, and how an evolving RSOB (or lack thereof) plays a part. When RSOB is strong, teaching in rural schools becomes less a matter of resilience and survival and more about acceptance or acknowledgement, purpose, and value. Teachers expressed a bifurcation between how they feel valued in schools versus how they feel valued in communities. Implications recommend more open dialogue with rural stakeholders to reconsider the roles of rural teachers inside and outside of schools.

**Keywords:** rural sense of belonging; affect; value; respect; English teachers; communities in place

## Introduction

Sense of belonging (SOB) is “*a unique element of interpersonal relatedness*” (Hagerty et al., 2002, p. 794) that takes into account how individuals “*feel themselves to be an integral part of that system or environment*” (Hagerty et al., 2002, p. 794). SOB foregrounds an individual’s psychological experiences and, importantly, their subjective evaluation of the level of integration in a particular context (Strayhorn, 2018). Additionally, belonging is relational, as community “*is a feeling of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members’ needs will be met through commitment to be together*” (McMillan & Chavis, 1986, p. 6).

This paper examines the impact of rural sense of belonging (RSOB) (Strayhorn, 2018; Wynhoff Olsen et al., 2022) on English teachers’ decisions to teach in rural American schools as well as how/if RSOB shapes the discipline itself. What it means to be rural, like other geographical categorizations, is a social construct. Given competing definitions of rural and a vast array in participants’ responses, we developed criteria for defining rural more discreetly for our study. We [four educational researchers] provide our full criteria in the Ruralities section of our Methodology.

Given the focus on English teachers in particular, we define RSOB as a “*recursive relationship between participants and rurality that helps English teachers determine congruency with personal (e.g., values, lifestyle) and professional (e.g., curriculum, class size, technology) considerations in place*” (Wynhoff Olsen et al., 2022, p. 212). RSOB is bidirectional and the parties involved may lack agreement regarding one’s belonging; thereby, people are likely to question acceptance, value, or respect in varying degrees. How people respond to a possible deficit is attributable to the stability of one’s RSOB. For some, belonging holds. For others, it arrests. We anticipate fluctuation within individual teachers, over time, as well as fluctuation with how teachers in the same career phase experience RSOB.

Exploring RSOB opens dialogue for how teachers participate in their lives as adults, teachers, and community members in rural places. Considering one’s belonging across these roles is substantial and relational. And yet, “*Belonging is not a function of one’s developing identity as much as a relationship between participant and place*” (Wynhoff Olsen et al., 2022, p. 199). Finding purpose in one’s place and trust in one’s abilities, both from the individual and also, from those within the organisation, impact RSOB. RSOB shifts as people grow, age, and interact in place: “*Just as place-based pedagogy looks to connect children to their local communities in meaningful ways that cross school/community boundaries, SOB opens the door . . . to find personal values and meaningful connections with rurality*” (Wynhoff Olsen et al., 2022, p. 200). Teachers, by nature, seek purpose and aim to make a difference; when they are acknowledged as someone doing that, their SOB heightens.

We did not set forth to examine RSOB “*...against a backdrop of political and ideological chaos*” (Brown, 2017, p. 35) during a global pandemic, yet, since this is our context, we recognise that the stress under which teachers currently live has potential to impact RSOB. Political and ideological chaos may also be more pronounced in rural spaces due to sheer numbers; for example, in a more populous place, people may be more likely to find others with similar beliefs. Many of these stressors impact teachers’ feelings of value and appreciation for the work that they do every day; therefore, a look at teachers’ RSOB would be incomplete without acknowledging the socio-political climate in the United States surrounding teachers and education.

Early on during the COVID-19 pandemic teachers were lauded as heroes; as the pandemic continues and stress is compounded, that heroism has waned. In addition to the effects of COVID-19 on teaching and learning, the current climate around public education in the United

States is rife with strain, accusations, and controlling efforts to diminish teachers' professional decision making. Examples related to English teachers include the recognition that “[p]arents, activists, school board officials, and lawmakers are challenging books at a pace not seen in decades” (Harris & Alter, 2022, para. 4). These bans are politicised and litigious. One participating English teacher offers perspective to this contextual backdrop:

*It seems like there has been a shift in student behaviour, demeanour, and value of education ... that has made it harder and harder to feel fulfilled and respected as a teacher. The radicalization of ... opinions has left teachers at the intersection of ... fiery debates... teachers are valued less and less as the general public becomes more ... vitriolic.*

Teachers in all settings are stressed and beyond the point of breaking. Their students are academically behind, yet their district grade-level rubrics that define student expectations remain the same (King, 2021). Teachers are burned out from working overtime to make up for labour shortages (Heyward, 2021), and they are concerned for their own mental health (Klecker, 2021) given the level of stress and exhaustion they experience every day. Resignation seems one of the few areas of control left to teachers, many of whom are beginning to exercise that control (Heyward, 2021; Walker, 2021), “leaving behind hard-earned licences and dreamed-of careers because they just can’t do what’s being asked of them” (Thomas, 2021, para. 4). Issues of teacher strain and burnout are echoed across rural America, adding to teacher shortages (Oyen & Schweinle, 2020).

Even amidst this general backdrop, when RSOB is strong in personal and professional spheres, teaching in rural schools becomes less a matter of resilience and survival and more about acceptance or acknowledgement, purpose, and value. We know that some English teachers flourish in rural spaces and others determine they are better suited elsewhere (Petroni & Wynhoff Olsen, 2021). Hagerty et al. (2002) also assert that a “strong sense of belonging is associated with better psychological and social functioning” (p. 800). In this socio-political moment in the United States (and likely, across the world), taking care of rural teachers and their mental health is paramount. We must pay attention to affective feelings of belonging, find opportunities to sustain a positive sense of relationality and value between teachers and community, and create space for dialogue and repair for those who are struggling in place. The construct of RSOB is one way for us to articulate the strength in rural teachers' experiences and to mark the dissonances that can occur when one does not achieve congruence.

### **The Power of Affect in Rural Spaces and on Teachers' RSOB**

Scholars have called for greater attention to affect in school spaces (Noddings, 1996) and in the English classroom (Boler, 2019; Smith et al., 2015). Recent attention has been paid to affect and teacher embodiment (Mandalaki et al., 2022) and the affective responses to school leadership (Balwant, 2017). Similar to this project, other studies have put affect theory to work in order to look at job satisfaction in education (Burić & Moè, 2020; Hamama et al., 2013). These studies, drawn predominantly from fields of psychology, understand affect as a close synonym to emotion.

While various fields and scholars have offered divergent conceptualizations of affect, we are drawing on a Spinozan-Deleuzian approach; one that understands affect as an ability for a body to affect and be affected (Deleuze, 1970/1988; Spinoza, 1677/1996). We are cautious not to conflate affect with emotion, understanding that “feelings are not the same thing as affect” (Brennan, 2004, p. 5) as affect and emotion are situated on different corporeal registers. We consider the ways in which literacies scholars have theorised the impact of affective intensities and charge of embodied interactions with teachers and students (Boldt & Leander, 2017; Ehret, 2019). Furthermore, we concur with Boldt's (2021) argument for students' critical need to experience “connection and vital mattering in their encounters with curriculum, pedagogy, and

*classroom belonging*” (p. 218) by extending the value of vitality and belonging to teachers and their experiences, both in and outside of rural schools. Stated differently, we recognise the need for teachers to engage in personal and professional experiences that bring about a sense of agency that positions them as vital (e.g., important, mattering to the places they inhabit) and provides them with vitality (e.g., energy, productive force).

We understand affect as intensity that circulates and registers through the body as something preconscious and pre-personal (Massumi, 2002). We also recognise the difficulty of pinning down affect as “*it is not objectifiable and quantifiable as a thing that we then perceive or of which we are conscious*” (Colebrook, 2002, p. 39). Throughout this study, we attempted to ask probing questions to invite participants’ consideration of seemingly banal experiences of teaching as ‘ordinary affects’ (Stewart, 2007); mundane daily events that may appear at first glance unremarkable but carry fleeting intensities that offer powerful and more durable insight upon further retrospection. By asking teachers about their feelings of value and acceptance and to express their teaching joys and stresses, we encouraged our participants to reflect upon and attune themselves to the day-to-day moments that contribute to how they self-identify and orient toward their communities and teaching profession.

Spinoza’s concept of conatus is of particular interest to us in this project. Conatus is associated with desire and, for Deleuze (1970/1988), power or appetites. According to Deleuze, “*the appetite is nothing else but the effort by which each thing strives to persevere in its being, each body in extension, each mind or idea in thought (conatus)*” (p. 21). It is the tendency toward perseverance paired with passions, such as joy, that leads to the increase of one’s ability to affect and be affected. When one’s ability to act is diminished by external forces, passions like sadness might set in. Stewart (2007) describes power as “*a thing of the senses . . . We do things with power, and to it*” (p. 83). As a result, it is the natural inclination of individuals to strive for power, desire, and appetite, not for domination over others, but in seeking productive passions over those that diminish our power to act. Power, thus, impacts the felt experiences and associations with a given place, experience, or in the case of this study, the intersection of a profession and community. It is this relationship to power and the resulting visceral, corporeal, affective responses, we argue, that contributes to one’s broader sense of belonging.

This study is an attempt to make sense of the surplus of affect responses and to investigate the residues, those that leave a trace, and to better understand the vitality of rural English teachers. Affective intensities are received and felt through bodily sensations. In the subsequent sections we attempt to underscore the sensorial when considering RSOB. While we concede that SOB as conceptualised by Strayhorn (2018) might be considered a more representational and humanistic theory for understanding inclusion or exclusion within communities, we believe that pairing Strayhorn with Spinoza and Deleuze offers a means to investigate the ways in which affect circulates in rural spaces and how teachers’ conatus—their power, appetites, and desires—is increased or diminished in ways that impact human flourishing in a meaningful way and the impact that conatus can have on one’s SOB.

## Methodology

For this study, we developed a survey to investigate how one’s self-identification, sense of value, acceptance, and support as teachers and rural community members influence a rural sense of belonging. Our study consists of two phases. We developed the concept of RSOB (Wynhoff Olsen et al., 2022) in Phase One, a qualitative study on pre-service and first-year rural English teachers in one western state of the United States. In Phase Two (this study), we complexify our understanding of a RSOB for rural English teachers ( $n=30$ ) with varied experiences, in eight states within the United States.

We created survey questions that invited open, qualitative responses regarding how teachers were engaging with the profession, their school, and their communities. Asking teachers to be vulnerable was necessary for our continued research and served as an act of reciprocity in an exhausting stretch of teaching: a way to offer teachers time to reflect and be heard. We developed quantitative survey questions using key terms related to RSOB from phase one—specifically, value and values, belonging, support, acceptance, respect—both in schools and in communities. We created both yes/no statements and questions on a 5-point Likert scale. Readers can request access to our full survey by emailing the lead author.

### **Participants Selection**

We used convenience, purposive sampling and invited 116 English teachers (via email and our university's social media page) to our survey. All invited teachers were graduates from our university's undergraduate program in English Teaching, MA program in English, and/or as members of our local writing project (a regional site of the National Writing Project). As a research team, we have developed and sustained collegial relationships with the teachers over the last 3-12 years, allowing us to ask affective questions and have teachers respond with candour.

Thirty-five English teachers completed our survey. We moved 30 participants forward in our study based on our described rural criteria (see Ruralities). Participants have a range of teaching experiences: twelve taught 1-3 years, eleven taught 4-7 years, six taught 8-12 years, and one taught for 24 years. The teachers vary in location; 22 live and teach in the same western, frontier state where they earned their teaching credentials and eight live in eight other states within the United States. Participants' relational status ranges from single to partnered, with 11 actively parenting.

### **Ruralities**

Rural classification involved three criteria: home and/or school located in a Rural-Remote or Rural-Fringe area, as classified by National Centre for Education Statistics (NCES); participants teach in secondary schools with student populations ranging from 1-306 students; and participants identify as a rural English teacher and/or a rural community member. Participants had to meet at least one criterion during their teaching career to remain in our study. While there are participants whose rural affiliations were present in multiple criteria, we did not value multiplicity more nor did we value one criterion over others.

First, we analysed participant demographics (home and school) using NCES (2006) categories for location: City, Suburban, Town, Rural, determined by proximity to urban centres. Town and Rural further subdivide into town/rural fringe, distant, or remote. Towns exist within an urban cluster yet “*rural areas do not lie inside an urbanised area or urbanised cluster*” (NCES, 2006, para. 3). Twenty-four participants live and/or teach in Rural-Distant or Rural-Fringe areas. It is important to note that NCES designations are complicated. For example, one participant's school is categorised as Town-Fringe, yet NCES offers competing definitions of rural within the town borders, designating Rural-Fringe and Rural-Remote areas across the street or in another neighbourhood. Additionally, at the local level, NCES designations of town are often interchanged with rural. Our corpus has several instances where teachers in the same school district do not agree with the NCES categorization nor with one another; one names their school and community rural and another names that same place suburban or large because of comparatives with their place of origin or previous teaching assignment.

The United States does not have a unified school classification system related to student population. Since we have participants teaching in nine states, with 22 teaching in the same frontier state, we used the classification system from that majority state. The breakdown follows:

### **Table 1: School Classification**

School size	AA	A	B	C
Secondary Student Population	779+	307-778	108-306	1-107

Class C and Class B schools are positioned as rural by locals and by our university. Sixteen respondents' have experience teaching in equivalent sizes to Class C or Class B. Looking at student populations also gave us a consistent view into teaching experiences that ranged across public middle/high schools, public school charters, private schools, and a therapeutic and educational facility for girls court-ordered to attend.

Finally, an aspect of rural sense of belonging includes how people self-identify. Thus, our final criterion is personal; seven participants self-identified as a rural English teacher and/or a rural community member. To clarify, we are not conflating self-identification with professional identity work. Rather, self-identification indicates who people feel that they are in relation to self. How one self-identifies plays a role in how/if one belongs, but more so, RSOB indicates who people feel that they are in relation to others. Self-identification extends from expectations, values, and attitudes; as these characteristics are unique to each individual and play a large part in whether one develops a sense of belonging in any given context (Strayhorn, 2018). Strayhorn further posits, "Although the need for belongingness is universal and applies to all people, it does not necessarily unfold for all people equally" (p.37). How one self-identifies will vary and intersect with one's sense of belonging.

### Data Analysis

Our guiding research question asks: How do English teachers experience and represent a rural sense of belonging (or lack thereof)? Using narrative case methodology (Becker & Renger, 2017; Hall et al., 2021), we examined 30 surveys completed by rural English teachers. In this section, we offer analytical steps, yet our process was recursive.

To begin, we reviewed each survey as it was completed and conducted member checks. We emphasised open-ended responses that yielded extended stories and an affective array. Using in vivo codes, we developed themes. Next, we organised themes into categories, merging like categories together and setting aside outliers. In so doing, we placed participant voices in conversation with each other to gain a deeper perspective of teachers' rural sense of belonging. We wrote individual data memos and came together twice to review the findings we found salient. We collectively reviewed outliers, connecting them to patterned themes when they offered a diverse perspective or setting them aside for individual, further analysis when the respondents' experience was vastly different. Specifically, we drew connections between aspects of value, support, trust, visibility/acknowledgement, place, and belonging; aided by how our teachers wrote about their experiences and bolstered our understanding of RSOB.

Then, to check alignment with respondents' closed prompts, we set our recurring themes alongside the survey's quantitative *yes/no* and *to what extent* statements. We were selective in which statements we analysed for this paper; to make our decisions, we re-read our quantitative questions/statements and looked for any traces in the language and/or what was indexed. Teachers' written responses held tracings to four survey statements: I feel valued in my current school; I feel valued in my community; To what extent do you feel accepted at school?; and To what extent do you feel accepted in your community?. These four created a foundation for emerging qualitative themes. We tallied frequency of use and calculated percentages. To aid our thinking across types of responses, we built analytical tables to show how a participant responded, writing into their experiences via open-ended questions. We also examined how the overall percentages and affective stories aligned, or not (both within an individual and across teachers).

In addition, we wrote found poems as a way to represent the collective stories teachers were sharing with us. Found poems are created using words or phrases from other sources (e.g., our open-ended survey responses) that are sequenced and layered together by a listener or arranger. To create our found poems, we maintained teachers' phrasing from the two discordant prompts: Describe a Teaching Joy; and Describe a Teaching Stress. For each prompt, we layered participants' responses together, culling and organising phrases that illustrate patterns and showcase emotions across teachers and across ruralities. In doing so, we maintained our goal to amplify teachers' voices and offer a cacophony from a typically marginalised group (Petroni & Wynhoff Olsen, 2021), rural English teachers.

Throughout our process, we resolved data inconsistencies and returned to participants for member checks. Narrative case methodology allowed us to maintain space for teacher participants to tell their stories and reflect on how they felt (Kinsella, 2010) with regard to living and teaching in rural schools and communities.

## Findings

### *How Participants Self-identify as/not Rural*

Of the 116 teachers invited, 35 completed the survey. Using our rural criteria, 30 have rural affiliations; their responses constitute our findings. Of our 30 respondents, 73% (n=22) self-identify as rural English teachers, and 67% (n=20) self-identify as rural community members and feel a sense of belonging in their community. Across the 30 respondents, data indicate that belonging to the profession of rural teachers is distinct from belonging to a rural community, and how one perceives rural matters. Sixty-seven percent (n=20) of respondents taught/lived in one area and 33% (n=10) experienced varied teaching experiences in different schools and locations.

To illustrate how participants met rural criteria, we offer Table 2. Table 2 provides micro detail on 10 of our teachers: 5 who have held one teaching job and 5 who have taught in multiple schools and communities. For those with a rural teaching repertoire, we provide two lines of data. The first provides classifications on where participants currently teach/live. The second line classifies previous rural experiences. We use only one line for self-identifications because we asked respondents to self-identify with regard to how they felt in their current teaching placement. Respondents used qualitative responses to indicate how their full rural repertoire impacts their belonging. In selecting these 10 respondents, we deliberately included all who are mentioned by name in this paper. Due to space constraints, we do not provide micro detail on all 30 respondents.

**Table 2: Select Participant Teaching/Living Demographics and Self-Identification**

Teacher Pseudonym	NCES School Classification	NCES Home Classification	Student Population	Rural Self-identification Teacher/Community
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Ada	Rural-Distant	Rural-Distant	91	Yes/No
Gemma	Rural-Remote	Rural-Remote	69	Yes/Yes
Grace	Rural-Remote	Rural-Remote	289	Yes/Yes
	Rural-Remote	Rural-Remote	140	
Harper	Rural-Distant	City-Midsize	258	Yes/No
Henry	City-Large	City-Large	309	No/No
	Town-Remote	Town-Remote	35	
Justin	Rural-Remote	Rural-Remote	140	No/No
	Rural-Remote	Rural-Remote	20	
Kali	Town-Remote	Rural-Remote	485	Yes/Yes
	Rural-Distant	Rural-Distant	94	
Kate	Town-Remote	Town-Remote	618	Yes/Yes
	Town-Remote	Town-Remote	310	
Natalie	Rural-Distant	Rural-Distant	18	No/Yes
	City-Small	Rural-Distant	201	
Phillip	Rural-Remote	Rural-Remote	24	Yes/Yes

Analysis indicates there is not a simple pattern regarding who self-identifies as rural. For example, not everyone teaching in a Rural-Remote school/community self-identified as a rural teacher and community member nor did those living in areas considered non-rural by NCES not self-identify; in fact, some participant's data showed ambiguity. Data further illustrate that layering teachers' stories across ruralities helps avoid fixed notions of rural by leaning into daily interactions and feelings from a person in place, across participants. We offer three stories to illustrate the rich complexity in teachers' stories.

Harper is in their third-year teaching and offers a telling case of someone who self-identifies as a rural teacher but not as a rural community member.

*I am the only teacher of colour K-12. I am also out as bisexual and gender questioning... I am not comfortable in my community and often choose to wait to fill up on gas or grab food ... because I'm nervous to see students or parents outside the school... I'm afraid I'll be confronted.*

Harper offers mixed feelings of acceptance and writes that positive experiences in their classroom affirm they are a rural English teacher. Yet, Harper's RSOB arrests due to deprivation of belongingness that has moved beyond the classroom and into daily routines, which over time, could lead to "loneliness, self-hatred, disengagement, and divestment" (Strayhorn, 2018, p. 41). Harper is persisting in rural, but with hesitation.

Natalie did not experience RSOB when teaching and living in her Rural-Distant community; therefore, she left her job (and does not self-identify as a rural English teacher) and now commutes (from her Rural-Distant community to which she self-identifies as a member) to a school in a nearby City-Small. Natalie explains that she "is not always comfortable" in her community and prefers "the outskirts" because "it gives me more freedom". She is able to live rural but not teach/live rural. She needs that separation to be only herself (and not teacher) in her rural community.

Henry adds further complexity. While Henry's survey responses show he does not currently self-identify as a rural teacher/community member due to the extreme shift between his two



teaching positions (see Table 2), his narrative tells a different story. When he lived “right in town—minutes away from Main Street” he “loved it more than anything”; during that first job, he self-identified as a rural teacher/community member. Given his previous belonging, Henry hopes to return to a rural area in his new career as a social worker. Henry’s storied nuances indicate there is more complexity to his experiences than a simple choice on a survey and relays that how one self-identifies is not a predictor for one’s RSOB.

### **How Participants Experience Teaching: Respect, Joys and Strains**

Ninety-three percent (n=28) of our participants self-identify as a member of their school communities, yet only seventy-three percent (n=22) of participants feel valued in their current school. When asked, Who or what has made you feel respected in your school?, most named 2-3 people as sources of respect; a few wrote 4-5 sources. The people mentioned comprise five categories of respect: 67% (n=20) of teachers reported colleagues, 50% (n=15) students, 47% (n=14) administration, 23% (n=7) parents, and 10% (n=3) school board.

Respondents’ rich descriptions indicated gratitude for people within their school community, an important finding since RSOB pertains to how one feels in relation to and with others. Respondents wrote about colleagues who “make time for me” and “value my insights just as I respect theirs”. One used the title “mentor teacher” and another described multiple staff members “mentoring her” because they have taken her “under their wing,” making her feel respected. Others focused on trust, noting reciprocal trust among colleagues. A teacher in one of our smallest schools foregrounded mutual trust because it “makes for a very strong staff and work culture”. One teacher directly wrote that professional and personal bonds with colleagues allow her to persist in teaching and living rural, “We ... text each other and keep in touch even if we just saw each other at school. If I didn’t have their friendship and support, I’d probably leave my current district”.

Teachers also feel respected by the rich relationships built with students over time, a respect that was heightened through student advising (e.g., Gay-Straight-Alliance) or coaching (e.g., Speech & Debate). Repeatedly, teachers used the possessive pronoun “my” to describe their students, indicating a relational connection and influencing a positive RSOB.

Responses to the prompt, Describe a Teaching Joy, further describe positive teacher-student relationships. We present the findings in a found poem, layering teachers’ voices together to showcase passion for students across ruralities.

## Teaching Joys

*My kids.  
I love their ideas, joys,  
personalities, and creations.*

*Those organic moments of true engagement with the curriculum are joyful.  
I love exposing kids to new authors, places, ways of thinking.  
Watching a student who ‘hates’ reading,  
find THE book.  
Taking off with that confidence.*

*Relationships! Making kids laugh,  
Connecting, building rapport.*

*The fact that I made his list of people  
that he wants to remember  
is as great of a joy as I can feel.  
I love my kids*

*I find joy in getting to be a part of students’ lives:  
opportunity  
to affect real and lasting and positive change  
on the lives of my students.*

*And none of these comments are about me  
as much as they are about students  
enjoying learning.  
THAT  
is the greatest teaching joy.*

The participants’ words, together, illustrate how relationships with students—both a teaching joy and a key source for respect—feed into how teachers feel in relation to those with whom they spend their workdays.

To add another nuance to how students make teachers feel respected, we share a final pattern, visibility. While many respondents’ desired to shed their teacher identity while in town, others found visibility a sign of respect. Kate, new to her community, feels respected when “acknowledged by students outside of the school setting (i.e., at extracurriculars, at the store, etc)”. Teacher visibility in town was the foundation of respect for Henry as well: “I was the only 9th and 10th grade English teacher at the school in which I taught, so I was known around town as ‘the English teacher’, which made me feel a sense of belonging”. To explain how visibility in town intersected with his RSOB, Henry explained his contrasting experience in a city: “I did not feel respected at all when I taught; instead, I felt like I was completely replaceable, had no autonomy, and was never given the freedom to make my own instructional decisions in the classroom”. Henry’s

experiences suggest that teacher visibility in town can be a sign of respect that impacts the teachers' work and agency in school; they also suggest that RSOB can fluctuate.

Respondents also specifically attributed visibility to parents as another source of respect. Respondents wrote about parents approaching them with gratitude for teachers' "*dedication to the school*" and "*the way I engage their child*". A few respondents wrote that parents offered accolades regarding curricular choices. In these responses, it was clear that parents have access to teachers and the teacher's work in the classroom/school is visible, leading to respect and a feeling of mattering. Grace offers another connection:

*I find that in my mind I'm equating being respected with being appreciated, ... which is not the same thing, right? But I think I feel disrespected when all the hours I put in go unnoticed and unappreciated, so then the noticing of my efforts feels like respect.*

Collectively, respondents appreciate being seen and having their work acknowledged, both of which play a role in RSOB.

When asked to note, *Who/what makes you feel respected?*, respondents provided mixed experiences with administration and school board members. These were the only two areas of respect that also triggered stories of disrespect within participants' responses to this prompt. Teachers' contrasting stories for administrators (principals and superintendents) indicate that there are moments when administrators advocate for teachers and articulate "*I am an educator they want*"; there are moments where teachers "*sometimes*" feel respected; and there are respondents who mark administration as a source of disrespect due to sparse communication. Participants indicated that how administrators speak about and support them (both in the building and in the community) impact how and if teachers feel respected. Data indicate that teachers in our smallest schools feel trusted and welcome to "*talk through challenges and find solutions*".

In terms of school boards, three respondents shared that they felt supported. The majority of respondents expressed that they do not feel respected by their board, they lack trust, and "*morale is low*" due to board decisions.

Attuned to the stresses noted when we asked teachers to offer their sources of respect, we reviewed responses to questions about barriers and teacher stress. Analysis across the data indicates key stressors: teacher roles, conflicting expectations, personal/professional balance, curriculum/grading, student behaviours/home lives, parents, and school boards. Similarly to how we shared respondents' joy, we present teaching stress as a found poem in our teachers' language. Unlike teaching joys that focus inward on teachers' relationships with their students, teachers' composite voice locates stressors that extend out into school districts and communities.

## Teaching Stress

*In many ways, I felt like a foot soldier in someone else's army;  
all the expectations and guilt that you feel just trying to survive.*

*Intense, defensive parents... they see absolutely no value in English education.  
I am never teaching just one thing to a group.  
I hate being mediocre.*

*I'm always 'on' and have little personal time  
or headspace for anything but teaching.  
It's so hard with two small children;  
I'm sacrificing other important tasks.*

*[Screams internally]*

*What do we do?  
The ever-growing demand to not only be the academic teacher,  
but also the parent, therapist, and interventionist;  
all while being extremely flexible.*

*I am not sure I fully bought in.  
I haven't mastered the art,  
I'm not sure it's possible.*

The patterns noted across our respondents' stressors tie in well to the field of teaching in general; and yet, we remind readers that our participants are rural English teachers, albeit in a pluralistic form of ruralities. They are teachers in rural places, in rural schools. It is here, in place, that their RSOB fluctuates and is dependent on their lived experiences.

### **How Participants Navigate School and Community**

The bifurcation between how teachers feel valued in schools versus in communities was pronounced. Seventy-three percent (n=22) of respondents indicated, I feel valued in my current school. Fifty-seven percent (n=17) of participants noted, I feel valued in my current community. Seventy-three percent (n=22) of respondents shared that they are not equally comfortable in school and community; they are more comfortable at school.

Those who are equally comfortable point to "a key group of people in both," a deliberate attempt to be "a present educator and community member". Teachers who experience more comfort in school explained that "[s]chool is my domain; I know what I'm doing, and I know the expectations. I understand the social cues of school". Teachers wrote about having friends in school, interacting with students, and having a voice. In their communities, teachers explained that the role of a teacher is heavy and "up for speculation"; "I try to stay as invisible as possible and shop 'over the hill'"; "[p]eople watch more closely the behaviours of school personnel, and I am very cognisant of how I present myself in public"; and "I would definitely not go into the bars here, even to just grab a burger by myself". One respondent wrote how closed he experienced rural communities to be:

*“It mostly seems to be people who want to do their own thing and be left alone”*. He expressed disappointment for the lack of welcome. A few respondents noted that they need more time to take part in the community because they are still *“feeling the new kid vibe”*.

Sixty-seven percent (n=17) of participants feel SOB in their communities; yet 35% (n=6) of these respondents defined community as school. Thereby, only 37% (n=11) of all respondents offered experiences and belonging in communities outside of school. Analysis of respondents’ written stories showcase the stories that respondents attributed to belonging and offer insight into how they connect comfortability and value to belonging.

Some who feel belonging have dual-roles: teacher-coaches who also attend students’ games and performances, and teacher-parents who have *“another tie to the community – my kids”*. One wrote that he worked summers in a coffee shop, so *“The post office folks know my name. The bank calls me to see if I have holidays planned. Local businesses... ask me questions about teaching and life”*. Another remarked that she belongs to the yoga, hunting/fishing, and horsemanship communities. Two noted that they felt valued and connected because they grew up in the town where they teach, and one explained that her partner’s employer welcomed their family immediately; one explained his belonging as a *“general feeling... a wave”*.

Overwhelmingly, those who said that they lack SOB in the community explained that their values are out of sync: *“I am automatically seen as liberal because I don’t go to church and I’m a teacher. Those two ideas condemn me in the eyes of many”*. Respondents also said they are not valued. They have heard neighbours express that teachers *“make too much money”* and they feel that *“many teachers are targeted by negative feelings and lack of support from community members”*. Given these community challenges, some respondents lacked RSOB or experienced fluctuations to it.

Kali’s frustrations illustrate the fluctuation possible with RSOB, even for those who teach and live near home:

*I’m so grateful that I don’t live in my school/community. I’m able to leave all the crap and destruction that are my current community and go home to a separate space. I really think it is saving my mental health.*

Similar to Natalie’s story earlier, Kali needs to remove herself so she can be a community member in a place where she is not the teacher. Often, teachers expressed weariness that they are not afforded opportunities to just be community members; rather, they are sorted out as teachers and face pre-existing assumptions that can be exclusionary.

A more severe case of not belonging showed up in Justin’s story. Justin, with two years of Rural-Remote teaching and living experiences, no longer self-identifies as a rural English teacher or a rural community member. During his first-year teaching, Justin identified as a rural English teacher and was drawn to small communities in which to raise his family. He was not welcomed by his neighbours and struggled to offer curriculum to which his students did not object. While he did not find belonging in his first school, Justin maintained an overall (albeit damaged) RSOB and sought out a new teaching job in another Rural-Remote community. Justin mused that since his first job occurred during a presidential election and the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, his more liberal political views were perhaps more pronounced, causing loneliness and dissatisfaction.

When Justin took a new teaching job in a different Rural-Remote community, his move indicated an issue of normative congruence, which *“suggests that individuals seek environments or settings that are congruent with their own expectations, values, attitudes, and positioning”* (Strayhorn, 2018, p. 36).

Unfortunately, as Justin's responses indicate, he was not finding job satisfaction in his new school. Justin did not feel valued or supported. When asked what led to his feeling of not belonging, Justin shared:

*Students make regular comments, both passive and aggressive, about my perceived beliefs and observed behaviours, and how they deviate from their own. Many students have made passive comments about violence being directed towards people who share my beliefs.*

Justin remarks that his visibility (for who he is and what he stands for) in school is a problem. In addition to clashes with students related to personal values, Justin is required to teach district-required curriculum and feels pressured by parents and community members regarding pedagogical decisions. Justin also shared, "I might feel a little more comfortable in the community, because fewer people know me by sight," but he now lacks RSOB. He is leaving his job and the profession. He will continue living in a rural area due to financial constraints related to moving.

As teachers live and work in place, they pay attention to what extent their values align with the community and how and if they are welcomed. Strayhorn (2018) found that people generally, "strive to be accepted by others, valued, and respected as competent, qualified individuals worthy of membership in a defined group or particular social context" (p. 35). Our data suggest that feeling valued and accepted matters to one's rural SOB and to how one feels, in general, in place: school or community.

## Discussion

This study analysed survey responses from 30 English teachers, in eight states within the United States. Their stories complexify RSOB while foregrounding teaching and communities in place.

Findings indicate that respondents' feel belonging in schools. For some, that's enough to build RSOB. Those who also asserted "I am a rural English teacher" (e.g., Phillip) yielded a positioning of respect, awe, and awareness for teaching English in rural schools. As data indicate, rural schools were classified in a range of places and of varying size. Others did not belong in school, as a lack of respect, value, acceptance, and/or support in place arrested their RSOB. We saw patterns of teachers connecting with colleagues and students, building relationships and feeling needed, seen, and valued. Teachers know their role and expectations in school; yet, when they move into the community as adult members, they are less sure of themselves. English teachers have a historied role that comes with a weight our participants feel across rural places, regardless of teaching duration. It was more typical for respondents to belong in school; if they experienced incongruence, stories point toward clashes within the community. Thus, for some (e.g., Justin), self-identification was a way to mark a lack of RSOB.

Teachers generally noted the sense of importance they feel toward their students while some also sensed a misalignment with their community and the political and bureaucratic systems that govern their classroom. They believed that they were important to their schools and yet underappreciated by those outside of the school. Such dissonance between school and community demonstrated the ways in which a teacher can view their job as vital to the young people in their classrooms, while at the same time, lack the vitality and energy they could exhibit due to constant criticism. In other words, vital mattering is not enough to sustain a teacher when vitality is absent.

Additionally, teachers shared stories rich with mundane experiences associated with teaching and being in a community which we would classify as ordinary affects (Stewart, 2007). So much of teaching is routinised by patterns and rhythms that get repeated Monday through Friday, particularly through daily schedules bookended by bells which make for a repetitious and predictable daily profession. Life outside of school is filled with its own banalities and rhythms as well. Teachers noted aspects of their RSOB heightened through interactions with their kids and

an appreciated visibility within their communities that manifested itself in grocery stores, restaurants, and school activities. When participants mentioned feelings of discomfort and fear when going to a local bar, getting gas, or buying groceries in their school communities, they underscore the seemingly mundane moments with important affective implications. Their senses—these bodily intensities—anticipate the potential for conflict with community members which reifies a lack of RSOB. For our data set, these stories overwhelm those who expressed alignment with community.

In terms of affect, their conatus demonstrated a desire to strive and persevere. Within the classroom, teachers offer stories of working with students over time, remarking how rewarding it is to take on a concept and due to sheer time together (sometimes years), be a part of maturing students and growing concepts. And yet, there are forces, often that reside outside of the classroom, that contend with their ability to affect and be affected. Moments where professional choices were challenged by community members, administrators, or school board members brought about negative passions and resulted in a diminishing of our participants' ability to act. When power is diminished in these ways negative passions set in, which has a lasting impact on the affective response teachers have toward their profession and the rural stakeholders that actively work against their ability to act, causing fluctuation in RSOB.

Teaching is a lonely profession, despite the social nature of classrooms. Given the often-isolated areas in which rural schools are located, RSOB offers a way to bring understanding to the beauty and strain of living and teaching rural. RSOB acknowledges the importance of paying attention to how teachers feel and how we, as community members, consider ourselves in relation to them. A willingness to consider how English teachers are experiencing their jobs in place also invites them into a larger collective of rural stakeholders whose stories “*can be recognised and shared*” (Brown, 2017, p. 44) so as to infuse stories of rural education by those who are experiencing it.

### Implications

This study recommends RSOB as a way to examine teachers' affect to better understand teachers who persist and teachers who leave rural areas; a response to Oyen and Schweinle's (2020, p. 22) call to “*examine what helps teachers persist over long periods of time in rural locations*”. Given our knowledge of our respondents' teacher preparation and high percentage of belonging in schools, we recommend continued emphasis on disciplinary knowledge, place-conscious pedagogies, and field experiences in rural communities and schools. Together, these components emphasise good teaching in place.

Once placed, however, those who struggle are challenged by their ascribed and lived roles within communities. This study indicates a need for more dialogic opportunities across stakeholders: teachers, administrators, and community members. We recommend conversations to articulate teacher roles and expectations. Listening across perspectives, with slowed attention on dissonances and affirmation for areas of alignment, could provide opportunity to make hidden ideologies explicit, update historied expectations if necessary, and work to bring the people in place in closer alignment.

Often, affective lived experiences of belonging are felt but invisible to many; drawing forward, articulated expressions of expectations and intent would go a long way toward healthy community relationships. Speaking to the multi-layered reality of visibility, participants noted the role of ordinary affects on their RSOB. Conversations allow these everyday but important events to also become visible; seeing the influences on teachers' conatus leads to further means of support and sustenance in areas that often experience teacher turnover. We believe that examinations and articulations of RSOB offer a way toward creating space for loving, intentional dialogue for teachers and community members. Given that teaching is a felt profession and should respond to time and place, such dialogue is exciting to consider.

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