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# Exploring Rural Teachers' Perceptions of the Achievement of Professional Agency in the Context of a School District Mandated Pedagogical Reform

Janice Marie Scudder

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RURAL TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE ACHIEVEMENT OF AGENCY

EXPLORING RURAL TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE ACHIEVEMENT OF  
PROFESSIONAL AGENCY IN THE CONTEXT OF A SCHOOL DISTRICT MANDATED  
PEDAGOGICAL REFORM

by

Janice Marie Scudder

FACULTY RESEARCH COMMITTEE

Chair: Karen Buchanan, Ed.D.

Committee Member: Jay Mathisen, Ed.D.

Committee Member: Gary Sehorn, Ed.D.

A Dissertation Presented to the Faculty of the  
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Doctor of Education

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“EXPLORING RURAL TEACHERS’ PERCEPTIONS OF THE ACHIEVEMENT OF PROFESSIONAL AGENCY IN THE CONTEXT OF A SCHOOL DISTRICT MANDATED PEDAGOGICAL REFORM,” a Doctoral research project prepared by JANICE MARIE SCUDDER in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of Education degree in Educational Leadership.

This dissertation has been approved and accepted by:

*Karen Buchanan*

Committee Chair

*Ch 3.1.21*

2/25/21

Karen Buchanan, Ed.D.

Professor of Education

*J. Mathisen*

2/25/21

Jay Mathisen, Ed.D.

Assistant Professor of Education

*Gary Sehorn*

2/25/21

Gary Sehorn, Ed.D.

Associate Professor of Education

## ABSTRACT

This phenomenological study used the chordal triad of agency within the framework of agentic ecological theory to explore how four rural elementary teachers perceived their achievement of individual professional agency as they participated in a school district mandated pedagogical reform. Given the paucity of research on rural education, the study aimed to clarify how rural teachers understood district-imposed top-down mandates and how that understanding affected their sense of professional agency. Within the chordal triad eight major stages of agency emerged: (a) agentic acceptance; (b) agentic anticipation; (c) agentic alienation; (d) agentic amnesia; (e) agentic guilt; (f) agentic suppression; (g) agentic rejection; and (h) agentic accommodation. Important ecological factors included the need for differentiated professional development, the quality of the relationships between staff and the administrative team, and the conditions of the relationship networks between colleagues. This study sought to emphasize the strength of rural school communities and to highlight opportunities for rural school districts to draw on those strengths to empower rural teaching staff. Implications for this study suggested a need to examine the concept of distributed leadership within rural districts, to attend to the educational discourses within schools, to draw on and improve upon the strengths already inherent in rural communities, and, above all, to deliberately cultivate a true sense professional dignity so that rural teachers' agentic practices may not just growth, but thrive.

DEDICATION

This work is for my family

And for all of my teachers

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## **Chapter One: Introduction**

The past 20 years have seen tremendous changes in how teachers teach and how students learn in the United States. Changing demographics, the rise of publicly-supported charter schools, and legislative initiatives have led some researchers to question whether teachers have now entered into a period of post-professionalism (Biesta, 2012; Hargreaves, 2000) with limited teacher autonomy and increased managerialism (Sachs, 2016). Federal mandates, like No Child Left Behind (No Child Left Behind [NCLB], 2002), placed increased accountability on federally-funded schools to increase performance standards for all students. Students were tested in math and reading in grades three through eight, and once in high school. Schools that did not make adequate yearly progress (AYP) as demonstrated through standardized assessments were penalized. How public-school students performed on state and national summative assessments determined the amount of money school districts could receive from the Federal government. Underperforming schools were sanctioned through staff cuts, reassignments, and state accountability measures (Black, 2017).

Although NCLB (2002) was replaced with the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) in 2015, the effects of NCLB (2002) are still felt in school districts across the country (Sachs, 2016). There is an increase in scripted curricula (Timberlake et al., 2017), mandated pedagogical reforms that frequently come from interest groups outside of the educational community (Gamson et al., 2013; Hiebert & Mesmer, 2013; McDonnell & Weatherford, 2013), and increased accountability placed on teachers to improve student performance on standardized assessments (Farrell & Marsh, 2016). Teacher evaluations continue to be tied to student performativity (Hallinger et al., 2014).

### **Purpose of the Research**

In an effort to enhance teacher practice and thus student achievement, top-down pedagogical and accountability mandated reforms, frequently spurred by political and cultural forces inside and outside of school, affect rural teachers' personal and professional sense of agency (Penrice, 2012; Lasky, 2005). The purpose of this research was to explore how general education rural elementary teachers perceived their achievement of agency within the context of a district mandated pedagogical reform.

### **Research Questions**

Using the ecological conceptualization of teacher agency (Biesta et al., 2015; Priestley et al., 2012; Priestley et al., 2015; Robinson, 2012; Vähäsantanen, 2015), this phenomenological study addressed two questions:

RQ 1: How do rural teachers perceive their achievement of individual professional agency as they participate in a school district mandated pedagogical reform?

RQ2: What insights does an ecological framework of agency offer as rural teachers participate in a school district mandated pedagogical reform?

### **Significance of Study**

In 2020, more than 51 million kindergarten through grade 12 students are projected to attend public school (National Center for Education Statistics, NCES, 2020). Of this number approximately nine million students attend rural schools in the United States (Showalter et al., 2019). The national average percent of rural schools in the United States, according to Showalter et al. (2019) is 28.5%.

Despite the number of students attending rural schools in the United States, there is little research in mainstream education journals that examines the lives of rural teachers in the midst of educational reform (Burton et al., 2013). Burton et al. (2013) wrote that “rural teachers and schools are portrayed as problematic in research literature” (p. 1). The absence of rural teachers from general academic research has been noted by other researchers like Coady (2020) and Vaughn and Saul (2013). The issue may well have arisen from bias about, and misconceptions of what rurality is and means to the people who live in rural places.

Schafft (2016) wrote that urban schools, with large populations, received the most amount of attention from researchers, adding that “rural education in the United States has consistently occupied both scholarly and policy peripheries” (p. 137). As Coady (2020) noted, the greater the amount of research in urban settings, the larger the impact the research has had on educational research funding and the academic community. This overemphasis on the importance of urban or suburban schools has perpetuated the marginalization and the perspective of the unimportance of rural schools (Mette et al., 2016; Surface & Theobald, 2014). Such research tended to view rural districts through deficit perspectives of urban bias and White, middle-class privilege.

My research contributes to existing literature on rural communities by shifting the focus to the lived experiences of rural teachers who live and work within the same local, state, and federal accountability policy mandates as their suburban and urban counterparts. My study presents an opportunity to understand how rural teachers perceived their achievement of agency in light of one such mandate.

### **Definition of Terms**

Educational researchers, like those in other fields of study, rely on specialized language to describe the work they engage in. The following list of terms provides the reader with definitions for key terms I used in my study. Some terms, like the chordal triad of agency and the ecological framework, are discussed fully in the literature review and in the conceptual framework in chapter three. The terms I list below are used later in the study.

#### **Co-Researchers**

The term used by Moustakas (1994) to refer to the participants in a phenomenological study.

#### **Epoche**

From the ancient Greek word *ἐποχή*, meaning suspension of judgment. A term used by Husserl (1931/2017) to describe phenomenological bracketing.

#### **Noema (Noemata)**

From the Greek word *νόημα*, meaning what is thought about. A term used by Husserl (1931/2017) that described the textural elements – the “what” - of a phenomenon: what a person remembers, judges, imagines, experiences physically, or wishes.

#### **Noesis (Noeses)**

From the ancient Greek *νόησις*, meaning intelligence or understanding. As used by Husserl (1931/2017), to describe the structural elements – the “how” - of a phenomenon: how or why the phenomenon came to be.

#### **Performativity**

Performativity refers to the “externally imposed ideological constructs around accountability and value for money, marketization and school autonomy” (Priestley et al., 2015,

p. 105). In school performativity cultures, teachers “perform” in response to agendas that are set by outside agencies.

### **Post-Performativity**

Post-performativity (Hargreaves, 2000) refers to the state of contemporary teachers who started school at the beginning of the era of professionalism (the late 1980s). As students, these teachers were taught using standardized curricula and evaluated using standardized assessments. These teachers also observed their own teachers evaluated and judged by external and standardized professional evaluation standards. The post-performative teacher has also gone through teacher preparation programs rigorously aligned to extensively regulatory frameworks of teacher preparation and managed professional competence.

### **Post-Professionalism**

This concept refers to the contemporary era of teaching where external forces attempt to deprofessionalize the work of teachers through increased managerialism.

### **Professionalism**

Professionalism describes the specialized knowledge, and the moral, ethical, and self-regulation qualities teachers are expected to demonstrate in their professional positions.

### **Limitations of the Study**

Phenomenological research emerges from the field of phenomenological psychology that draws on the insights provided by phenomenological philosophy (Polkinghorne, 1989). Husserl (1931/2017) emphasized the importance of the connection between phenomenology and psychology, writing that “phenomenology is the court of appeal for the fundamental questions of psychological methodology”(p. 231). Although I have read and studied phenomenological philosophy, I am not a psychologist by training. As such, the insights I gathered from my

phenomenological research depended on my ability to translate the structures of phenomenological philosophy to phenomenological psychological research (Polkinghorne, 1989).

Phenomenological reduction relies on the ability of the researcher to interpret common themes with imaginative variation to derive the essence of the experience (Moustakas, 1994). When I used the process of imaginative variation I “intentionally alter(ed) the various aspects of the experience” (Polkinghorne, 1989, p. 55) to arrive at a deep understanding of the participant’s experience. The danger in doing so was that my interpretation could have become idiosyncratic, shaded by my own prior experience of a similar phenomenon.

The focus of phenomenological research is to “understand better what it is like for someone to experience that” which the co-researcher has experienced (Polkinghorne, 1989, p. 46). There were three limitations to my data collection. First, my presence as the researcher and district colleague could have inhibited the co-researchers’ full and honest responses to interview questions. The second was the data analysis method I chose, a modification of the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method of phenomenological analysis (Moustakas, 1994). Researchers who chose other phenomenological data analysis methods might have arrived at different conclusions.

The third limitation to my study was that of time. Phenomenological research uncovers the meaning of essences as they reveal themselves to the co-researchers and the researcher. The essences reveal other structures of the unconscious – Husserl’s (1931/2017) concept of *noema* and *noesis* - that merit their own examination and analysis (Moustakas, 1994). Given the time limitations on the length and breadth of my phenomenological study, the uncovering of the meaning of the teachers’ perceived achievement of agency was limited to what was revealed through a set of three interviews with each co-researcher.

Given the subjective nature of qualitative research, and phenomenological research in particular, it was perhaps important to remember that phenomenological research, as Polkinghorne (1989) stated, presented a “conclusion that inspires confidence because the argument in support of it has been persuasive” (p. 57). The conclusion I arrived at – my description of the essence of the co-researchers’ experiences – was strong if it corresponded to the reader’s experience of a similar phenomenon (Polkinghorne, 1989). My skill describing the essences of the co-researchers’ experience relied on my ability to allow the co-researchers meaningful opportunities to reflect deeply on their experiences.

### **Delimitations of the Study**

Phenomenological reflection is, as Husserl (1931/2017) explained, “an essential insight always attainable because immediate” (p. 229). I chose the phenomenon of perceived rural teacher agency in the context of a mandated pedagogical reform because the reform in question has been in effect for the past three years. Three of the four teachers I interviewed had been in the district since the initial implementation, and the fourth began teaching in the district at the beginning of the second year of implementation. All co-researchers had the opportunity to implement the reform, were evaluated using reform criteria, and continued to seek ways to implement the reform. I chose elementary teachers with whom I developed a cordial professional relationship. Left out of my study were teachers with whom I did not have the same relationship, secondary teachers, and newly-hired teachers who had not received the same professional development training.

The results of this study could be of interest to administrators and other rural, local education leaders, like superintendents, administrators, and school boards who accept outside funding. Yet to seek applicability or “purposiveness” may run counter to the origins of the

phenomenological method. Phenomenological research attempts to describe the structures of consciousness (Stewart & Mickunas, 1990), where the perceived phenomenon is an intentional act on the part of an individual. The nature of this perception incorporates many “perspectives and levels of experience” (Stewart & Mickunas, 1990, p. 45). Consciousness, then comes from the contextual elements of the experience: time, space, expectations, ideas, and emotions. Although there may be some overlapping elements and structures of similar experiences among other rural teachers, the goal of this study was to describe the *noemata* and the *noeses* of the four teachers within their own particular professional context.

### **Organization of the Study**

This study is comprised of five chapters. In Chapter One, I introduce the educational problem of practice, the purpose of the study, and the two research questions I addressed. I provide evidence for the significance of the study, define key terms and then discuss some limitations and delimitations of my research.

In Chapter Two I provide a review of the literature. I include the historical background of the literature on teacher agency, with a focus on Emirbayer and Mische's (1998) conceptualization of agency as a temporally embedded process of social engagement and Priestley et al.'s (2015) agentic ecologic framework. I discuss contemporary rural research and examine the concept of performativity cultures in school organizations, and the effect on teacher agency.

Chapter Three includes the rationale for my research design, my research setting, and selection of the co-researchers, data collection, the ways I address the issues of trustworthiness and credibility, and my data analysis procedures.



In Chapter Four I consider the findings of my data analysis through the application of phenomenological processes (Moustakas, 1994) to arrive at emergent themes. I provide an explanation of the essence of the phenomenological experience of the four co-researchers. I conclude with a summary of findings.

In Chapter Five I analyze the study's findings through the phenomenological analytical lens. I suggest insights from the ecological framework of agency to help shed further perspective on the description of essences and note implications for practice. I make recommendations for practice for rural teachers and administrators, propose ideas for further research, and reflect on the phenomenological journey I undertook throughout the study, followed by a conclusion.

I have attached my list of references at the end of Chapter Five, followed by the Appendices.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

As rural teachers navigate the terrain between mandated reforms and professional identity, their lived experiences may provide insight into their understanding of professional experiences that contributed to their perception of the achievement of agency. Phenomenological research holds promise for offering unique windows into the lived experiences of rural teachers as they make sense of their professional agentic identities in times of imposed change and uncertainty (Vaughn & Saul, 2013). Phenomenological studies such as mine that seek insight from an ecological framework (Priestley et al., 2015) could reveal the conditions that promote, constrain, or deny how rural teachers perceive their achievement of agency.

## **Chapter 2: Review of the Literature**

The literature review drew on research about teacher agency and the ecological factors that contributed to teachers' perception of agency in the context of mandated pedagogical reforms (Biesta, 2012; Biesta et al., 2015; Oolbekkink-Marchand et al., 2017; Priestley et al., 2015 ; Pyhältö et al., 2017; Vähäsantanen, 2015).

### **Criteria for Inclusion**

For the purposes of this literature review several criteria were determined. Policy and position papers were generally excluded, unless they had been cited regularly throughout the literature or provided a basis for conceptual understanding of concepts of teacher identity, teacher responses to reforms, or teacher agency. Generally, this review focused on research conducted between 2010 and 2020, unless older research had been cited regularly by other scholars. All studies cited here have been cited extensively, indicating their value to the field. All literature was obtained from peer-reviewed journals and consisted of original studies, with one meta-analysis. This included a variety of qualitative and quantitative research. This literature review contains published and unpublished doctoral dissertations.

The reason for the use of these criteria was to place this study within current discussions of educational problems, practice, and theory. Literature cited was found in EBSCO, Google Scholar, ERIC, ProQuest, PsycINFO, and Education Source. Key search terms included teacher identity, teacher agency, teacher perception of agency, ecological theory of agency, the temporal factors of agency, and reform and policy.

### **Historical Background of the Literature**

The subject of teacher agency is situated within larger discourses relating to society's perception of teachers, the idea of teacher professionalism, and the ecological factors that have

an impact on whether teachers perceive they can achieve agency in the context of the sociocultural systems of their schools and district.

### **Teacher Professionalism**

The professional status of teachers has been what Lortie (1975/2002) called “special but shadowed” (p. 10). This is due in part to how society has viewed teachers and the teaching profession, and in part to how teacher professionalism has been shaped and defined by those outside the field.

Society, including the media, has granted the teaching profession a certain status, and as a profession it has received some deference in the United States. At the same time, those who practice the profession – teachers – have not received the same kind of deference (Akhmetova et al., 2014; Beckford, 2020; Block, 2014; García, 2015) reflecting an ambivalence in society about the worthiness of the teaching profession and those who practice it.

Schools and school districts are highly organized institutions and operate under two levels of bureaucracy. Principals and superintendents supervise the management of school business, students, and personnel. School boards, or citizen governing boards, assume control over schools. These boards are composed of elected members who are vested with full legal authority over the schools and school personnel. Frequently, those who sit on school boards have had no prior background or experience working in schools. Elected by members of the community outside of the profession, school board members may not possess a deep understanding of the nature of teachers and teaching (Gerstl-Pepin, 2015; Wright, 2018). Policy decisions may reflect the position of outside interests that may not be compatible with the needs of teachers and students.

**Institutionalized Control**

The institutionalized control over teachers in terms of the day-to-day management and operation of schools, the choice of curriculum, and the focus on certain instructional practices also has come frequently from forces outside the boundaries of the school district (Evetts, 2009; Sachs, 2016; Priestley et al., 2015). Evetts (2009) argued that the concept of occupational professionalism has shifted in recent times, from having an occupational value to an ideology. In her view, the current conceptualization of professionalism has now centered on a locus of managerial control. In public service occupations, such as teaching, administrators and others removed from the day-to-day work of teaching have constructed professional discourses that not only rationalized occupational changes, but at the same time used them as disciplinary tools, affecting teacher agency. Researchers (Biesta, 2010; Evetts, 2009; Evetts, 2014; Hargreaves, 2000; Lasky, 2005; Priestley, 2011; Priestley et al., 2015; Sachs, 2016) found that this ideology of service limited teachers to two functions: teaching their subject matter within prescribed parameters, and classroom management.

Twenty-first century teaching reform movements and data-driven accountability measures have been mandated by state, federal, and locally-controlled governments (Evetts, 2014; Sachs, 2016). There has been, however, a dichotomy between what society needed from teachers and education, and what the educational system provided (Olivant, 2015). In the current performativity era, conditions of trust, discretion, and competence (Evetts, 2009) that allowed teachers to thrive as professionals have been challenged through pervasive regulation (Olivant, 2015). The role of teacher, Craig (2012) wrote, has changed from “curriculum maker to curriculum implementer” (p. 90). Top-down pedagogical mandates have affected a teacher’s

sense of professional identity, teacher learning, and how teachers perceived their agency as professionals.

### **Conceptualizing Agency**

Teacher agency has been discussed for many years, and has taken on a variety of philosophical approaches, frequently focused on identity, sociocultural, and structural factors (Eteläpelto et al., 2013; Priestley et al., 2013; Priestley et al., 2015). The problem in arriving at a clear definition of agency seemed to lie in the dichotomy between the agent as actor, and the structures in which the agent acted. Priestley et al. (2015) explained that when agency is regarded in this light, the “key question is whether structure or agency is more important in determining or shaping social action” (p. 19).

### **Traditional Agentic Traits**

In the literature review, two main themes came to light on teacher agentic identity. These were viewing agency as an individualistic inner trait, and viewing the agentic teacher as one factor among many that contributed to a successful school organizational system.

### ***The Teacher as Individualistic Agent***

In 1997, Bandura described a concept of self-efficacy as “the power to originate actions for given purposes” (p. 3). This power was the “key feature of personal agency” (p. 3). Bandura’s (1997) emphasis on an individual’s ability to exercise control over a situation arose from the individual’s determination, perseverance, and “beliefs in one’s capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments” (p. 3). Bandura (1997) acknowledged that although there were socio-cultural factors that influenced how individuals exercised control over their situation, ultimately, it was up to the individual to “organize and execute given types of performances” (p. 21).

Using this concept of self-efficacy, agentic teachers who were the most successful implementers of instructional reforms of educational policy and reform did not need to rely on the prevailing school cultural and climate to sustain or support them (Stein & Wang, 1988). Regardless of circumstances, these agents acted because they had the individual capacity to do so. Successful teachers-agents were those individuals who possessed certain moral, intellectual, or other personal characteristics that allowed them to succeed, regardless of socio-cultural circumstances (Fullan, 2006; Jacobs et al., 2014; van der Heijden et al., 2015).

**The Teacher Leader.** A corollary to the theme of the individualistic teacher-agent was that of the teacher leader. Teacher leaders were those who inspired other teachers (Fullan, 2006), served as mediators between administrators and teachers, and were the early implementers of educational policies and organizational initiatives (Jacobs et al., 2014). These change agents (Fullan, 1993; Fullan, 2006) could transform “the very conditions, contexts and cultures at all levels of the system (...) in other words, the future agenda of large scale, sustainable educational change” (Fullan, 2006, p. 122). This concept of the innate agentic capacity of teachers permeates the current performativity culture of schools (Priestley et al., 2015) and its espousal was taken up by researchers like Jacobs et al., (2014), Jenkins (2019), and van der Heijden et al. (2015). van der Heijden et al. (2015), for example identified four categories and 11 subcategories of an effective teacher that resided primarily in the teacher’s personal make-up. In these authors’ view, these innate traits allowed change agents to not just transcend the prevailing sociocultural climate, but improve it.

### **The Teacher as a Factor of School Success**

The second predominant theme in the literature on teacher agency focused on identifying the teacher as just one factor among many that improved teaching and learning. This theme was

most evident in literature that analyzed the current performativity culture in schools (Evetts, 2009; Evetts, 2014; Priestley et al., 2015, Wilkins, 2011). Performativity cultures emphasized the collection and analysis of quantifiable data to demonstrate student proficiency in learning through the use of numerical benchmarks (Hattie, 2018). The conceptualization of the teacher as a factor in school improvement (Priestley et al., 2015) reduced teaching and learning to how teachers implemented curriculum, gathered data, or performed other assigned tasks and roles (Biesta, 2015; Wright, 2018). By casting the teacher as a source of input and student progress as output (Priestley et al., 2015), the complexity of teaching, including the teacher's ability to make decisions and judgements, was negated (Biesta, 2015). An example of the quantification of teaching and learning in classrooms came from Hattie (2018). In his meta-analysis of the 256 factors leading to greater student learning, Hattie (2018) listed collective teacher efficacy as having the highest effect size in improving student learning outcomes. Hattie's (2018) view reinforced the idea that if teachers believed they had the ability to do so, could indeed have a positive effect on student learning. This view echoed the theory of individual agentic capabilities of teachers.

Although teachers have played a critical part in student learning, many variables in classrooms have not been under a teacher's control (Gamson et al., 2013; Goldhaber et al., 2014). Viewing a teacher as a factor of school success has been reflected in teacher evaluations through standardized rubrics (Hallinger et al., 2014). When teacher evaluations were largely based on increased student test scores, the sociocultural environment of schools declined (Hallinger et al., 2014; Wilkins, 2011). The impact on teacher agency tended to be negative when teachers feared punishment or retribution for low test scores.

### **Conceptualizing Rurality**

Although economic, societal trends, and the rise of digital media have contributed to the urbanization of rural places (Cloke, 2006), the concept of rurality occupied a particular time, space, and place in the minds of people in the United States, and was frequently synonymous with agriculture (Cloke, 2006). Media portrayals of rural places and residents cast them as anachronistic “isolated islands of cultural specificity and traditionalism” (Cloke, 2006, p. 19; Eppley, 2015; Theobald & Wood, 2016). Common stereotypes about rural places and the people who lived there were reified by depictions found in mainstream media and mass-market fiction (Coady, 2020; Eppley, 2015; Theobald & Wood, 2016), serving to perpetuate deficit perspectives about people who live in rural settings (Surface & Theobald, 2014). Coady (2020) noted that, for those who live in urban places, rurality was viewed as a monolithic entity with little attention paid to distinguishing the diversity that found in rural communities and in rural settings.

### **Rural Educational Policy**

The monolithic view of rural places and people has been perpetuated by state and federal governments (Schafft, 2016). The culture, organizational systems, and teaching staff in rural schools differed significantly from urban schools, yet state and federal educational policies frequently made no distinction between the two systems (Johnson and Howley, 2015; Showalter et al., 2019). Federal and state mandates and regulations, in particular those attached to school improvement issues, did not address the particular strengths and needs of rural school communities. One-size-fits-all policy implementations neglected the educational needs of people who live in rural areas (Coady, 2020; Johnson & Howley, 2015; Mette et al., 2016; Moffa & McHenry-Sober, 2018).



Fewer educational opportunities for rural populations, combined with geographic isolation, lack of financial capital, and unequitable access to state and federal legislative input, influenced local-level policies that had an impact on how rural teachers and students experienced school (Johnson & Howley, 2015). Federal mandates like NCLB (2002) added stress to rural school systems that have traditionally struggled to recruit, hire, and retain highly-qualified teachers (Johnson & Howley, 2015).

### **Rural Schools**

Rural schools fulfilled a unique position within the communities they served. Frequently the rural school was the center of the community, providing economic, institutional, and community support (Schafft, 2016). Rural schools, typically smaller than urban schools (Schafft & Biddle, 2014) engendered a strong sense of belonging to members with their communities, acting as a place for educational as well as social engagement opportunities (Eppley, 2015; Vaughn & Saul, 2013; Wenger et al., 2012). The rural school district often was the largest employer in the area, and the close ties between teachers, parents, students, and local civic organizations provided those within the community a strong sense of belonging and support (Eppley, 2015; Schafft, 2016; Schafft & Biddle, 2014).

### **Rural Teachers**

Rural teachers played an integral part in the life of the rural community that went beyond working in a rural school (Burton et al., 2013). Those who taught in rural communities frequently grew up in the local community, attended public schools there, and developed strong relationships that bound them to the community (Burton & Johnson, 2010; Eppley, 2015; Moffa & McHenry-Sober, 2018). Rural teachers who chose to live and work within the communities they grew up in desired to serve the community and contribute to its development (Burton &

Johnson, 2010; Eppley, 2015). Arnold et al. (2005) noted that teachers who worked in rural communities preferred them because of the strong sense of community both within and outside the school doors. Other researchers, such as Vaughn and Saul (2013; Schafft, 2016), found that rural teachers drew on their close community ties and deep connections to students and families to overcome any school-wide challenges or obstacles.

### **Conceptual Framework**

Biesta and Tedder's influential work (2007) laid the foundation for what is now known as an ecological theory of agency. Biesta and Tedder (2007) drew on the seminal work of Emirbayer & Mische (1998), who articulated the concept of the chordal triad, to frame their theory of ecological agency.

#### **The Chordal Triad of Agency**

In 1998, Emirbayer and Mische asked the question, "What is agency?" (p. 962). They posited the following about human agency:

Human agency (is) a temporally embedded process of social engagement, informed by the past (in its habitual aspect), but also oriented toward the future (as a capacity to imagine alternative possibilities) and toward the present (as a capacity to contextualize past habits and future projects) within the contingencies of the moment (p. 963).

For Emirbayer and Mische (1998), agency was the result of the dynamic relationships between actors, environment, and temporal dimensionality. Agents acted within the "interplay of habit, imagination, and judgment" (p. 970) in their environments in the "chordal triad of agency" (p. 970) – the temporal-relational contexts of action that were defined by iteration (past actions and experiences), projectivity (future actions), and practical-evaluative decisions (what the agent did in the present).

### ***The Three Chordal States***

Based on past actions, decisions, judgements, routines, and contexts – the iterative dimension - the agent draws on past experiences to make future goals. The iterative dimension allows the agent to make future goals in the projective temporal dimension. In this “process of the imaginative reconstruction of the future” (Priestley et al., 2015, p. 24) the agent engages in the practical-evaluative dimension based on the “contingencies of the moment” (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, p. 963). Each temporal state always works in a “chordal triad” (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, p. 970) with each other. Depending on the individuals, their life course (Biesta & Tedder, 2007), their experiences, the context and structure of the environment, and the resources available to them (Priestley et al., 2015), one temporal state in the chordal triad will be more dominant than the others, influencing the individual more strongly in that particular temporality.

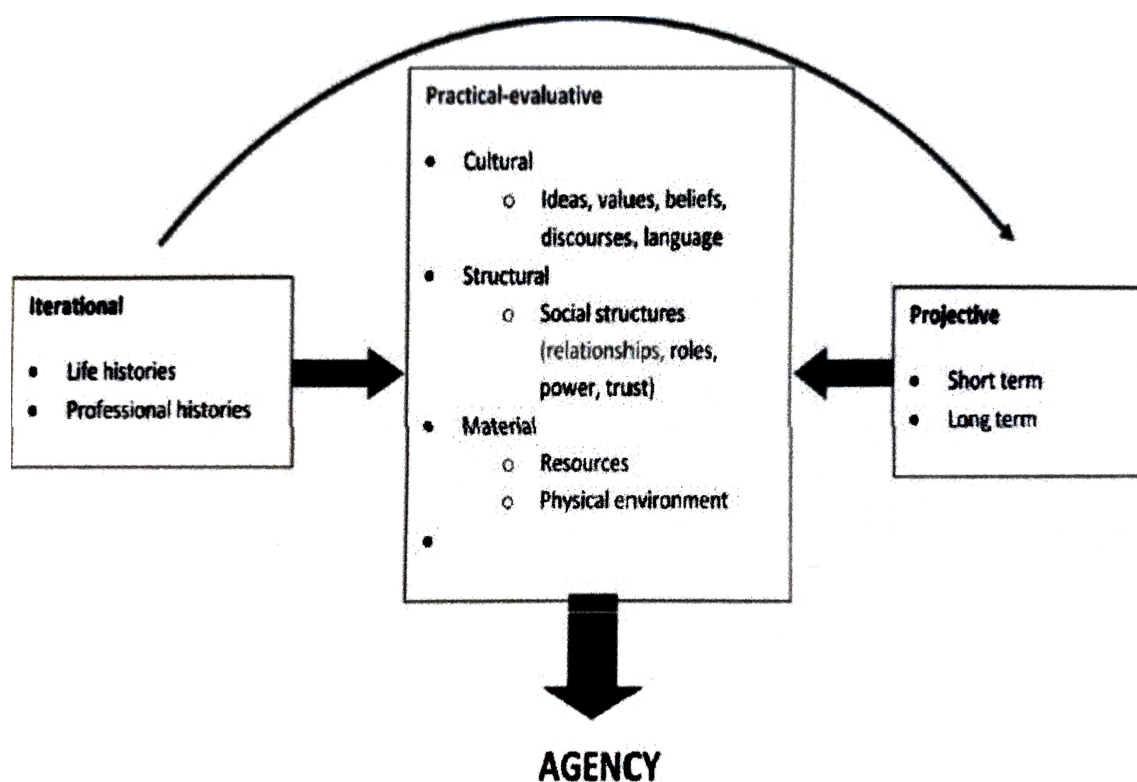
### **The Ecological Theory of Teacher Agency**

Using the theory of the chordal triad of agency (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998), Biesta and Tedder (2007) described agency as something that could be “achieved through the active engagement of individuals with aspects of their context-for-action” (Biesta & Tedder, 2007, p. 132). The premise of ecological agency was that agency was a situated achievement (Biesta & Tedder, 2006). For Biesta and Tedder (2007), actors “always act (ed) by means of their environment rather than simply in their environment” (p. 137). Agency emerged from the relationship between the individual, the contextual and structural factors of the environment, and the resources available within that environment. This conceptualization of agency (Biesta & Tedder, 2007) framed agency in terms of how agency is achieved, and the social, structural, and cultural elements within organizations that made it possible. In this understanding of agency, agency was an emergent phenomenon (Priestley et al., 2015). It was the “*interaction* between

capacities and conditions” (Priestley et al., 2015, p. 3, emphasis in original) of individuals and the sociocultural and relational conditions that created the “particular ecologies” (Priestley et al., 2015, p. 3) of an environment where agency could be achieved and enacted.

**Figure 1**

*Priestley et al. (2015) Conceptual Model of Ecological Agency*



Priestley et al. (2015) described the ecological theory of agency as a methodological and theoretical framework. Drawing on Biesta and Tedder’s (2007) assumption that agency was contextual, and using Emirbayer and Mische’s (1998) description of agency as the interplay between the three temporal dimensions, Priestley et al. (2015) stated that the ecological framework offered an empirical way to analyze which contextual components within the three temporal dimensions contributed to teachers’ achievement of agency. The model they designed

incorporated the chordal triad of agency (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998), its contextual and structural components, and the professional and personal experiences that affected the achievement of teacher agency.

In the model, Priestley et al., (2015) separated the components of each temporal dimension. In the iterational dimension, the authors distinguished between personal and professional experiences. In the projective dimension, they separated short from long term goals. The projective-evaluative dimension shows the different cultural, structural, and material components or the teacher's educational environment that affect agency. The achievement of agency, therefore, was always rooted in the past, directed towards the future, and enacted in a concrete situation in the present.

### **Implications for Teacher Agency**

This understanding of teacher agency had implications for the kinds of professional experiences teachers encountered in schools, and the possible effect the imposition of top-down mandates and a performativity culture might have on how teachers perceived their achievement of professional agency.

The strength of one temporal dimension over the other two influenced the agentic acts of the individual. The school environment, including the imposition of top-down curricular and pedagogical mandates, professional development opportunities, personal and professional relationships between teachers, colleagues, and building administrators, and the availability of materials and resources determined a teacher's projective and practical-evaluative perception of agency (Biesta & Tedder, 2006; Biesta & Tedder, 2007; Priestley et al., 2015).

In the next section of the literature review I discuss four ecological themes that impacted the perception among teachers of agency: professional identities, professional and personal beliefs, professional and social relationships, and school structures.

### **Perceived Agency and Professional Identities**

Teacher professional identity and personal identity are intertwined. By looking at teacher identity through an ecological framework of agency, Priestley et al. (2015) clarified an understanding of professional teacher identity as a dynamic interplay between iterative professional experiences and emotional identities.

### **Iterational Identities**

Hong et al. (2017) and Vähäsantanen (2015) discovered that teacher professional identity developed over time and consisted of multiple identities, formed through the types of iterative experiences they encountered (Priestley et al., 2015). As teachers continued throughout their careers, they encountered reforms they were expected to enact, which came from either state or national levels - the macro level - or district or school levels - the meso level (Buchanan, 2015; Murphy & Torff, 2016). A teacher's own career history - the micro level (Buchanan, 2015, Donnell & Gettinger, 2015, van Veen et al., 2005) played a role in determining how and if teachers implemented top-down reforms. It was at the intersection of all three levels that the concept of teacher identity seemed to influence how teachers achieved agency as they made sense of educational reforms.

### **Moral and Ethical Identities**

Lorti (1975/2002) noted that teachers imbued their profession with moral and ethical dimensions that were rarely found in other professions. Teachers who saw their profession as a moral and ethical calling seemed to resist reform implementation if it went against their vision of

themselves as teachers (Lee & Hawkins, 2015; Vaughn, 2013; van Veen et al., 2005). Their resistance was either conscious or unconscious, but in either case, they perceived educational policies as isolating them from their vision as teachers. Moral and ethical identities, closely connected to teachers' emotional identities, affected a teacher's perception of agentic possibility (Biesta, 2010).

### **Emotional Identities**

Wenger et al. (2012) found that teachers continually navigated the space between their multiple identities and the social and cultural contexts in which they worked. As a result, teachers experienced a particular kind of vulnerability as they attempted to make sense of professional commitments. Perhaps this was due, in part to the fact that teachers worked in a profession in which they themselves were nurtured from a young age. Kelchtermans (2009) wrote that it was impossible to extricate the person of the teacher from the professional teacher. Vulnerability manifested itself in the range of emotions teachers displayed toward the changing climate in schools that emphasized performativity cultures (Eteläpelto et al., 2013; Hubbard et al., 2014; Keddie et al., 2011).

Top-down mandates were often attached to evaluative judgements about a teacher's professional practice. Teachers developed an aversion to taking the risk of implementing a reform due to the perception of a loss of control or feeling punished (Le Fevre, 2014). In these situations, teachers' sensemaking focused on those environmental cues (Weick, 1995) that teachers felt posed a threat to their personal and professional identities. As Lasky found (2005), external reform mandates affected teacher agency and self-worth when identity was closely linked to the enactment of self within the profession.

Reforms that focused on accountability and management rather than collegiality appeared to threaten a teacher's self-worth as it was tied to professional identity (Jenkins, 2019; Poulton, 2020). Teachers who experienced fear, guilt, or anger, or felt compromised or deprofessionalized shut down and withdrew into professional isolation (Hong et al., 2017).

Both Nias (1996) and Hargreaves (1998) wrote about the powerful ways emotions shaped teacher identities. Nias (1996) noted that emotions, attitudes, and beliefs underlaid all instructional and classroom decisions, while Hargreaves argued that a teacher's emotions were inextricably bound to the moral purpose of the profession. Darby (2008), Hargreaves (1998), Kelchtermans (2009), Nias (1996), and Schmidt & Datnow (2005) all found that teachers' emotional responses to student achievement, and the social and emotional goals they had for their students, were a strong influence on how teachers responded to change within school structures. Later researchers (Fairman & MacKenzie, 2014) observed teachers' strong emotional reactions to the perceived effect performativity policies had on their students.

Hargreaves (1998), however, took care to explain the difference between the genuine emotional responses teachers had when considering the welfare of their students, and the emotional manipulation of teachers. Hargreaves (1998) wrote that external forces brought by performativity cultures inside and outside of schools created a false "culture of caring" (p. 836) that worked against teachers. This culture, instituted and managed by administrators, offered the "gentle sedative...of collaboration, team-building, stress-management, wellness" (p. 837) that tamped down stronger emotions that could stimulate teacher agency and purpose.

### **Perceived Agency and Professional and Personal Beliefs**

How teachers responded to mandated reforms influenced how or if they worked to implement them. In either case, teachers manifested their own agentic identity, adopting what



Ketelaar et al. (2012) identified as assimilation, accommodation, or rejection stances towards the reforms.

### **Assimilation**

Researchers such as Jenkins (2019), Ketelaar et al. (2012), Parsons et al., (2016), van der Heijden et al., (2015), and Vaughn and Saul (2013) noted that teachers who assimilated change reforms and implemented them – ready implementers - possessed strong agentic beliefs, a high sense of motivation, mastery of their own teaching, a sense of entrepreneurship, and an understanding of the reform that allowed them to go beyond individual implementation to encouraging collaboration and greater collective efficacy among their colleagues. In some cases (Luttenberg et al., 2013; Stillman & Anderson, 2015) teachers with strong feelings of agency viewed the reform as an opportunity to grow more into their own personal definition of what kind of teacher they wanted to be, allowing them to change even as they assimilated the reform.

### **Accommodation**

Assimilators differed from accommodators. Accommodators were those teachers who implemented the reform if it happened to fit into their personal vision of teaching or if it aligned to their professional belief systems and values - whether a proposed reform was a “good fit” (Buchanan, 2015, p. 709; Stillman and Anderson, 2015; Vaughn, 2013). Teachers who found that a mandate was a good fit with their own personal beliefs and attitudes were more likely to implement it. For example, Donnell & Gettinger (2015) found that teachers whose beliefs aligned with an RTI mandate had positive attitudes towards it. Initiatives that addressed a teacher's personal, professional, moral, and ethical constructs of teaching were initially readily accepted. However, as Vaughn (2013) noted, once the reform appeared to contradict the

teachers' professional and moral sense of self, teachers not only stopped implementing it, but in some cases they left the profession.

Researchers like Hadar and Bemish-Weisman (2019), Ketelaar et al., (2012) and Vaughn (2013) found that a common theme among accommodators was their belief in their own autonomy. Buchanan (2015), Priestley (2011), and Robinson (2012) noted that one of the initial acts of accommodators was to resist any change, but then attempt to negotiate a compromise between the mandated reform and their implementation of it.

### **Rejection**

A third group of teachers - rejectors - were those who used their agency negatively to resist the policy, whether overtly or secretly, or who reworked it completely to fit into their professional paradigm (Ketelaar et al., 2012). These teachers' agentic responses reflected their own personal dispositions towards change or risk-taking. Researchers pointed out that negative agentic agency was frequently related to loss of control (Jacobs et al, 2014; Le Fevre, 2014); increased accountability, lack of trust, and peer pressure (Lasky, 2005; Parsons et al., 2016); and not understanding the reform policy (Fairman & Mackenzie, 2012; Robinson, 2012).

### **Perceived Agency and Professional and Social Relationships**

A teacher's individual beliefs about professional agency were partly shaped by the professional and social relationships developed by teachers with administrators and colleagues. The nature of these relationships affected a teacher's agency in response to the collective beliefs of the school administrator and a teacher's colleagues (Tam, 2016).

Social sensemaking played an important part in determining whether teachers implemented a reform (Weick, 1995). Social reciprocal identity (Pietarinen et al., 2016) was created between individuals and the social collective. Individual sensemaking was shaped and

bounded by common social experiences shaped by school administrators and collegial relationships (Priestley et al., 2015; Pyhältö et al., 2015).

### **School Administrators**

School administrators either improved a teacher's sense of agency or hindered it, depending on the hierarchical positioning in a school, the administrator's stance toward the reform (Halvorsen et al., 2019; Hong et al., 2017; Robinson, 2012), and the teachers' level of trust in the administrator (Bektaş et al., 2020; Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015.).

### ***Hierarchical Positioning: Distributed Leadership***

Parsons et al. (2016) and Poulton (2020) found that teacher agency improved when administrators encouraged distributed leadership, as some teachers adopted a reform more readily when they learned about it and understood it through informal leadership channels. Adigüzelli et al. (2016), for example found that distributed leadership had positive effects on teacher professional development and learning. Collaboration time with teacher leaders promoted positive achievement of agency (Eteläpelto et al., 2013; Fairman & Mackenzie, 2014; Hallam et al., 2015; Sales et al., 2017) by giving teachers opportunities for facilitating and managing their own learning (Pyhältö et al., 2015). Distributed leadership also could promote negative agency, however, (Buchanan, 2015; Daly et al., 2010) in situations where teachers formally and informally grouped together to contest the reform or renegotiate it according to their own belief systems.

### ***The Administrator's Stance Towards the Reform***

How teachers made sense of a reform, and whether they accepted or rejected it, depended on their perceived value of it (Stein & Wang, 1998). The manner in which reforms were presented to teachers by administrators influenced their acceptance of them. The attitudes

and dispositions of school administrators towards the implementation of the reform were key (Goddard et al., 2019). Building administrators were critical to building the positive perceived value of the reform and its adoption (Louis et al., 2015). Those administrators who championed the change, facilitated its implementation, and provided ongoing support allowed teachers to understand and use it (Pray et al., 2017).

**Teacher Trust.** Administrators who created structured opportunities for teachers to implement reforms generated trust in, and familiarity and experience with, the policy (Buttram & Farley-Ripple, 2016). Trust placed in the administrator by teachers extended to relationships among colleagues (Bektaş et al., 2020) and the collective beliefs held by teachers about power relationships in the school (Adigüzelli, 2016). In situations of mistrust, teachers implement overrode administrators (Jacobs et al., 2014), either through positive or negative agentic actions.

### **Collegial Relationships**

A critical indicator of whether school reform was successful was not how many teachers had adopted it, but how deep and wide the reform had spread, whether it could be sustained, and whether teachers took ownership of it (Coburn, 2003; Ketelaar et al., 2012). One key component of ensuring the success of a school reform, and building teacher agency, was collegial support.

Relationships between teachers and colleagues based on support, trust, and interdependence contributed to a teacher's willingness to adopt new reforms (Hubbard et al., 2014; Pyhältö et al., 2015; Wenger et al., 2012). Coburn et al. (2008) wrote that the "dimensions of social networks (...) provide(d) opportunities for social capital transactions" (p. 223) that fostered and supported teacher agency that, in turn promoted teacher understanding and adoption of curricular reforms.

Teachers moved from feeling isolated to feeling valuable when they worked with colleagues in school communities (Hong et al., 2017; Wenger et al., 2012). Self-reflection among trusted colleagues (Lovin et al., 2012; Sannino, 2010; Wallen & Tormey, 2019) led to a higher perception of agency, as participants in a study groups found the freedom to explore commonalities among instructional practices, and the support and encouragement to reflect on them and change them. In these cases, teachers' social networks facilitated and spread change. In other cases (Cloonan et al., 2019; Taylor et al., 2019) teachers' social networks challenged and subverted change when teachers participated in critical narrative inquiry and collaborative research. The pervading school climate and culture within school structures contributed to either acceptance of, or challenge to the achievement of teacher agency and the adoption of reforms.

### **Perceived Agency and School Structures**

Another important component in the achievement of teacher agency was how school cultures supported and sustained it (Hong et al., 2017; Stoll et al., 2006) in their contexts-in-action (Biesta & Tedder, 2007). There was a strong connection between "teacher learning and occupational well-being" (Pyhältö et al., 2015, p. 824). Structures that encouraged and supported shared responsibilities, and prompted collaborative goal-setting created positive infrastructures that contributed to the achievement of positive teacher agency (Hallam et al., 2015; Lee et al., 2011; Priestley et al., 2015).

Agency and identity were based on collaborative networking relationships with different teachers within school cultures (Coburn et al., 2008; Coburn et al., 2010; Fairman & MacKenzie, 2014; Penuel et al., 2009). These networks, in turn contributed to how reforms and curricular changes were implemented. Structures that allowed teachers to explore shared beliefs and values, where the expectation was for teachers to collaborate safely, allowed teacher agency to expand

(Oolbekkink et al., 2017; Pyhältö et al., 2015; Wenger et al., 2012). Context and culture drove identity negotiation, agency, and professional growth.

### **The Performativity Culture of Schools**

Agency is the mediated capacity to act in a professional space (Halvorsen et al., 2019) depending on the contexts for action in which agents find themselves (Biesta & Tedder, 2007). Researchers (Buchanan, 2015; Halvorsen et al., 2019; Oolbekkink et al., 2017) characterized the perception of professional space that either bound or freed teachers, and that was influenced by change, relationships, and professionalism. The perception of space allowed a teacher's sense of agency to expand or contract in response to an outside condition (Halvorsen et al., 2019). There was a sense of reciprocity between a teacher's agency and a teacher's perception of professional space. How teachers perceived their professional space shaped their perception of agency. Professional space reflected the conditions that mediated it and how teachers used it (Biesta et al., 2015; Halvorsen et al., 2019; Oolbekkink et al., 2017; Priestley et al., 2012; Priestley et al., 2013).

In today's educational landscape performativity drives school norms and teachers' sense of agentic professionalism (Bourke et al., 2015; Louis et al., 2015; Murphy & Torff, 2016; Olivant, 2015; Wilkins, 2011). The current performativity culture in schools noted by researchers (Biesta, 2010; Craig, 2012; Endacott et al., 2015; Goldhaber et al., 2014; Keddle et al., 2011; Jenkins, 2019; Priestley et al., 2013; Priestley et al., 2015; Sahlberg, 2011) has led to diminished teacher agency in what Wilkins (2011) characterized as an audit-target culture.

For researchers like Biesta (2012), Bourke et al. (2015), Hendrikx (2020), and Wilkins (2011), teachers and teaching have run the risk of disappearing under increased managerialism

(Hendrikx, 2020) and “the market environment” (Wilkins, 2011, p. 392) of data-driven accountability, parental choice, publicly-funded charter schools, and school waivers.

The concept of teaching as a vocation (Wilkins, 2011) has been replaced by the view that teachers were in some way “obstacles to the marketization of education” (Hargreaves, 2000, p. 168). Teachers searched for some “micro-autonomous spaces” (Wilkins, 2011, p. 401) where they could exercise their professionalism, as long as they hit their required data targets (Evetts, 2014). This conceptualization of teaching stood in stark contrast to that of teachers as reflective and skilled professionals who were able to understand and engage with complex educational structures (Biesta, 2015).

Sachs (2016) identified several themes in performance cultures that shaped teachers' professional practice and identity. There was little trust in the employee; increased accountability, including data compliance, control, and surveillance; and a range of standards that cast the teacher as a technician, not a teacher. Under these conditions, Sachs (2016) wrote, “teacher professionalism (is) a contested site” (p. 418).

In Biesta's (2012) view, schools and schooling needed to move away from solely being a “function of and thus be entirely functional for society” (p. 44). To do this, teachers needed to reclaim their place in the organizational and systemic decisions about why and how schools were run, and for what purpose, perhaps by pushing back against the “structural forces that they find problematic to their pedagogical goals” (Buxton et al., 2015, p. 499). Biesta (2012) advocated that teachers return to what he called “the very heart of teaching” (p. 44), where teachers made the best decisions about what was best for students and learning through informed agentic actions.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

The ecological components of a teacher's current educational context affected the teacher's projective goals and plans. The achievement of agency was based on the ecological contexts of the iterational dimension. Past iterational experiences laid the foundation for projective and practical-evaluative goals. Teachers who had rich iterational experiences were able to orient themselves toward making projective goals, facilitating their practical-evaluative actions to act intentionally within their environments. Teachers who had fewer, or negative experiences were not. The importance of the ecological structures working through iterational, projective, and practical-evaluative temporal dimensions contributed to the achievement of teacher agency, and how teachers perceived their achievement of it.



### **Chapter 3: Methodology**

#### **Purpose of the Research**

This phenomenological study explored how general education rural elementary teachers perceived their achievement of agency in the context of a school district mandated pedagogical reform.

#### **Research Questions**

Using an ecological conceptualization of teacher agency (Biesta et al., 2015; Priestley et al., 2012; Priestley et al., 2015; Robinson, 2012; Vähäsantanen, 2015), the questions this study addressed were:

RQ 1: How do rural teachers perceive their achievement of individual professional agency as they participate in a school district mandated pedagogical reform?

RQ2: What insights does an ecological framework of agency offer as rural teachers participate in a school district mandated pedagogical reform?

#### **Methodology**

Phenomenology was the research method that aligned well with my inquiry. Phenomenology studies the appearance of things, of “phenomena just as we see them and as they appear to us in consciousness” (Moustakas, 1994). Drawing on the philosophical traditions of Descartes, Husserl, and Merleau-Ponty, the phenomenological researcher seeks to place individuals as the center of their truth. Through intentionality, the individual moves from seeing the world through a stance of natural attitude, where an individual takes for granted assumptions relating to the world (what is seen and accepted), to a reflective stance where intentionality directs an individual’s consciousness to an experience in the world (Husserl, 1931/2017; Stewart & Mickunas, 1990). The manner in which the individual understands what appears to the

consciousness – the phenomenon - gives the phenomenon meaning (Moustakas, 1994). A phenomenological investigation allows the researcher to be open to the “full range of social reality” (Stewart & Mickunas, 1990, p. 129) of an individual’s lived experience.

Phenomenology studies “things as they actually appear” (Husserl, 1931/2017, p. 147). Its emphasis on only using the data available to the individual’s consciousness is key to understanding the essence of the phenomenological experience. Husserl wrote, “logical concepts...must have their origin in intuition...founded on certain experiences” (1970, pp. 251-252). The basis for scientific knowledge can only be apprehended from internal perceptions of the phenomenon, of finding the indefiniteness of an experience through a reflective process that does not involve analysis or explication (Dahlberg, 2006; Moustakas, 1994; Stewart & Mickunas, 1990), or, in other words, casting aside the natural attitude to find what makes the ordinary, extraordinary.

Phenomenology seeks to uncover or discover the meanings (essences) of human experience (Husserl, 1931/2017), or, as van Manen (1997/2016) stated, “to explicate the meanings as we live them in our everyday existence, our lifeworld” (p. 23). Asking rural teachers to explore the “dimensions, incidents, and people intimately connected with the experience” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 116) of perceived teacher agency in the context of a mandated pedagogical instructional reform aligned with the tenets of phenomenology. The phenomenon of perceived agency belonged to the everyday professional existence of teachers. When a phenomenon presents itself to an individual’s conscience by an intentional act, it presents the essence of the experience (Moustakas, 1994).

When my co-researchers reflected on their perception of agency, they brought to the foreground the essence of their experience, like a figure against a background (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2012).

### **Phenomenology, Temporality, and Agency**

The concept of temporality is a critical component of phenomenology (Stewart & Mickunas, 1990) and it was in the construct of temporality that I believed an ecological framework of agency (Priestley et al., 2015), with its foundations in the chordal triad (Emirbayer & Mische, (1998) might offer insights into how teachers perceived their agentic capacity in the context of a mandated instructional reform.

### **Phenomenological Perception and Intentionality**

In phenomenology what an individual perceives is made of perceptions and intentions (Moustakas, 1994). It is through perception that an object becomes present and real (Husserl, 1970). How the individual perceives an object – an experience – a phenomenon – comes from the partial perception of the object while apprehending it at the same time as a whole object (Moustakas, 1994).

An intentional experience is one I bring to my consciousness, and through noematic reflection each experience is part of a series of meanings and essences that reveal themselves to us through thoughts, feelings, judgments, and memories (Moustakas, 1994). The act of perception occurs in the present (Husserl, 1973). How I perceive an act in the present (the practical-evaluative dimension) however, is tied to my retention of it from the past (the iterational dimension, based on my future goals (projective-evaluative dimension).

### **My Role as the Researcher**

Recognizing that the researcher is the key instrument in a qualitative study (Creswell & Poth, 2018), it was important for me to disclose my background and reasons for interest in conducting this research study.

### **Relevant Background**

I began teaching in 1979 as a French and Italian high school teacher in the greater Boston area. In those days, and in the school districts I worked in, teaching was regarded as a solitary affair where teachers were the experts in their field. The amount of direct supervision and the imposition of mandates were minimal. After teaching for 10 years I left the profession to raise my family and reentered teaching in 2008 after completing re-certification in Oregon as an elementary teacher with an ESOL endorsement.

For the past 13 years I have worked as a teacher, coordinator and educational specialist in rural schools all across a Pacific Northwest state, travelling from the coast, through mountains and over to deserts, working with rural administrators, PreK, and K-12 teachers. As a rural classroom teacher I worked with student populations where more than 80 percent of all students were culturally and linguistically diverse. As a program coordinator and educational specialist I worked with rural administrators and teacher leaders to present professional development programs to promote educational equity for traditionally marginalized students. I have partnered with rural communities, including parents, families, university organizations, health care providers, and other stakeholders in rural communities to bring change to rural classrooms and policy decisions. These roles and experiences influenced my conception of what it was to be a rural educator, and had the potential to influence how I interacted with, and reacted to the experiences related to me by my rural co-researchers.

### **Reasons for Interest in the Study**

The teaching world as I once knew it has completely changed, particularly in the wake of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). NCLB imposed sanctions on the schools I worked in, reorganizing teaching and administration staff, changing teacher-created units of study to scripted, mandated curricula, and imposing standardized formative assessments on students. School district administrators, curriculum coordinators, and instructional coaches in the districts I worked in replaced cooperative and constructivist teaching and learning pedagogies with school schedules comprised almost solely of literacy, ESOL, and math. Administrators required me and other teachers to teach these subjects in a certain way, use certain materials, and account for our successes or failures in reaching “benchmark” scores through weekly data meetings and lesson plans that detailed our adherence to implementing the curriculum in scripted, preapproved ways. My evaluations, as well as those of my colleagues, focused on my adherence to the mandated pedagogical and curricular reforms. As time went on I noticed that although I was able successful in navigating this new kind of teaching world, able to assimilate, adopt, or reject (Ketelaar et al., 2012) its imposed reforms to balance and improve my teaching, others could not. I began to wonder what effect the working conditions of the school had on me and my colleagues, and why some of us seemed untouched by the imposed pedagogical reforms, some seemed bemused or disaffected, some tried to hide, and some left the profession.

### ***Rural Education Research***

As noted in the literature review, there is a dearth of mainstream academic research into the lived experiences of rural educators who face the same accountability mandates as their colleagues who live and work in suburban or urban areas. Published rural research tended to

focus on the lack of integration between teacher education programs and rural teaching candidates (Eppley, 2015), the problem recruiting, hiring, and retaining rural teachers (DeFeo & Tran, 2019), or problems novice rural teachers encountered as members of a new rural community (Azano & Stewart, 2015). In their narrative analysis of rural research, Burton and Johnson (2013) identified four main story lines that emerged from rural literature, which portrayed rural educators from deficit perspectives. My study's phenomenological investigation of rural teachers gives my co-researchers educational equity by allowing them to tell their own stories as fully engaged members of a rural school district and a rural school community.

### **Bracketing of Potential Bias**

Although Husserl's (1931/2017) conception of transcendental phenomenology strives for the complete removal of the researcher's natural attitude when examining the phenomenological experiences of self and others, it is impossible for the researcher to totally enter the qualitative process in a state of pure objectivity (Peshkin, 1998). However, I identified several methods to eliminate potential bias and subjectivity. These were member checks, creating an audit trail, writing analytic memos, and describing through phenomenological reduction (Husserl, 1931/2017; Moustakas, 1994) my own experience of mandated pedagogical reforms.

### **Member Checks**

Member checks helped eliminate bias and subjectivity by providing authentic and reliable data. Using Yin's (2014) suggestion of a "planned path" (p. 114), I conducted member checks before the final, third interview. These member checks addressed the issues of the kind of data I collected, and whether the data accurately reflected the information the co-researchers had shared with me in the previous interviews. Ongoing consent was part of the member checking

process. Asking teachers to work with me as co-researchers (Moustakas, 1994) allowed them to feel they had full and equal access to the presentation of the data.

### **Audit Trails and Analytic Memos**

The audit trail was made up of documents that allowed me to retrace the steps I took to arrive at my final presentation of my results (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Raw data, all notes pertaining to how I collected my data, including questionnaires and schedules, how I reduced the data through the phenomenological process, as well as all of my personal notes, as well as a personal researcher were part of the audit trail (Creswell & Poth, 2018). When I wrote analytic memos I kept track of anything that appeared to be significant to me during the entire research process.

### **Phenomenological Reduction: The *Epoche***

As a researcher, I needed to continuously reflect on my own assumptions, beliefs, and dispositions towards my own natural attitude in the context of the phenomenon I studied. To do this I engaged in my own process of phenomenological reduction, or *epoche* (Husserl, 1931/2017). Through the *epoche* I attempted to remove all previous understandings of the phenomenon I investigated by looking at my experience of it as if for the first time (Moustakas, 1994). *Epoche* – what van Manen (2014) called the “critical phenomenological device that should defeat bias” (p. 354) - helped me describe the experiences of the co-researchers with fresh eyes so that I could collect their experiences, perceptions, and memories. Merleau-Ponty (1945/2012) equated this to “bring(ing up) (...) all the living relationships of experience, like the net that draws up both quivering fish and seaweed from the seabed” (p.73). Through *epoche* I “self-suspended” (Husserl, 1931/2017, p. 189) from preconceived attitudes and judgments, not to eliminate them, but to place them “out of question for the present, while the larger context (was)

being investigated” (Stewart & Mickunas, 1990, p. 26). In that way, the experience of the phenomenon was unique to the co-researchers. The essence of the experience belonged to them.

### **Ethical Considerations**

At the time of the completion of this study, I had worked in the Acorn School District for one- and one-half years, developing collegial relationships with the four teachers who participated in the study. In Acorn I had a dual role as a teacher and a researcher. Although I was not a teacher evaluator, I was also not a traditional classroom teacher. As a researcher I entered into a human relationship with the co-researchers (Josselson, 2013). There was the potential for co-researchers to perceive a power imbalance in the hierarchical relationship of the interviews I conducted (Creswell & Poth, 2018), as one of my professional responsibilities was to coach teachers to implement the mandated pedagogical reform. In my time in the district the superintendent and other district administrators consulted with me on matters of instructional policy. My professional position allowed me to develop a unique perspective on how teacher agency intertwined with the reform.

### **Protection of Privacy**

I protected the co-researchers' privacy by using pseudonyms and other masking devices to protect their names, workplaces, and other potentially revealing identity information.

How I decided to share my results while guaranteeing the anonymity of the co-researchers was vital. Teacher attitudes, beliefs, and experiences are the foundation of the iterational temporal dimension of agency that lead to practical-evaluative decisions and projective goals for teaching and learning in classrooms (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). To share data in such a way that revealed the co-researchers' pedagogical decisions, practices, names, or relationships with colleagues, families, and administrators would have been deleterious to them.



The only person in the district who was aware of my research was the superintendent, who granted me permission before I began my interviews. I ensured confidentiality and protection for the co-researchers by guaranteeing that members of the administrative team would not be interviewed and would not review the data. Since the school district was small I obscured geographic and other identifying details, and in my findings used composite stories to guarantee participant anonymity (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

### **Institutional Review Board (IRB)**

Prior to beginning data collection, I obtained approval from George Fox University's IRB as well as from the school district. (See Appendix D.) Approval was necessary to maintain ethical concerns for the respect, welfare, and justice for research participants (Creswell and Poth, 2018). During the course of my research, I adhered to the policies and procedures established by George Fox University's IRB at all times.

### **Trustworthiness and Credibility**

Phenomenological researchers attempt to describe how people experience the essence of a phenomenon – an experience - in their lives through reiterative, deep analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

### **Generalizability**

The nature of the phenomenological experience – intensely personal and unique to each participant – does not usually allow the experience to be empirically generalized to greater populations (van Manen 2014).

In phenomenology, the individual and the essence of experience are involved in a dynamic relationship where the world and the subject are inseparable (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2012). van Manen (2014) noted that phenomenology describes “the existential empirical

meaning structures of a certain phenomenon or event” (p. 348). van Manen (2014) wrote that the role of the researcher is to describe the essence of the phenomenon, to reveal it, not to construct it. In phenomenological research, to generalize an experience using external forms of validation would allow the experience to be interpreted away from its meaning (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2012).

### **Trustworthiness and Validity**

van Manen (2014) wrote that phenomenology cannot rely on commonly-used measures of qualitative research validity; the *epoche*, he explained, is perhaps the highest measure of the validity of a phenomenological study in that it suspends the researcher’s “personal or systemic bias” (p. 347). Combined with the “originality of insight, and its scholarly treatment of sources” (van Manen, 2014, p. 347), a phenomenological study of high quality describes a phenomenon beyond the natural attitudes of everyday life, allowing readers to grasp or come into contact with an essence of human experience that connects them to the lifeworld of the other’s experience. The trustworthiness and validity of the study, therefore, are determined by the “appraisal of the originality of insights and the soundness of interpretive processes demonstrated in the study” (van Manan, 2014, p. 348), not by the application of construct validity measures that are incompatible with the phenomenological method.

### **Research Setting**

In the following section I provide descriptions of the research setting, a discussion of the case, and the selection process of the co-researchers.

The Acorn School District (pseudonym) is a rural district in the Pacific Northwest, located approximately 80 miles from a major metropolitan area. There are two elementary, one middle, and one high school in the district. All of district’s teachers and administrators are

White, with the exception of one high school teacher who self-identifies as Hispanic and one teacher who identified as half Asian. The district serves fewer than 1,000 students, of whom about eight percent have been designated by state and federal criteria as culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD).

Four years ago, Acorn, along with other districts, received a \$270,000 grant from the state department of education to improve educational outcomes for students who come from traditionally underserved populations. Acorn was assigned a consultant from the state who worked with the district to determine possible student financial supports. Beyond this, the school district had complete discretionary power from the state on how to spend the grant, the only caveat being that expenditures had to promote educational equity for students who were CLD. District administrators decided to take a portion of the funding to require all K-12 teachers to undergo a three-day professional development series on the Academic English Acquisition (AEA; a pseudonym), on how to improve the acquisition of English academic language for students who spoke a language other than English. Training was provided by a local educational service district (ESD) and nationally-trained curriculum consultants. For two years, outside consultants affiliated with a national coaching institute came twice a year to conduct walk-throughs of classrooms with administrators to determine the level of implementation of the reform and to offer professional development refresher training using the materials and scaffolding instruction. The district's English language development (ELD) teacher, a former teacher in the district, received her ESOL certification during the three-year implementation phase. The ELD teacher provided on-the-ground AEA implementation support to administrators and teachers.

### **Co-Researchers**

I used criterion sampling (Creswell & Poth, 2018) to recruit four elementary school teachers to participate in my study. Criterion sampling was appropriate as all of the co-researchers had experienced the phenomenon of achieving agency in the context of implementing AEA and were able to articulate their perceptions of it (van Manen, 2014). The sample size fit the recommended range of participants for a phenomenological study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Two teachers from each elementary school participated in the study. The sample size represented about 25% of the total elementary district certified staff. The four teachers represented a range of grade levels and experience within the district.

### **Selection Criteria**

For one- and one-half years I had the opportunity to work extensively with the four teachers I included as co-researchers. All four teachers have worked with students who are CLD and have sought to implement AEA. Vicky (all names are pseudonymous) was in her third year as a teacher, Erica had been teaching for 13 years, and Marion and Phyllis had more than 25 years' experience as elementary classroom teachers.

### **Data Procedures**

The primary source of phenomenological data comes from those individuals who have experienced the phenomenon being studied (Creswell & Poth, 2018). As part of the bracketing process (Yin, 2016) my first set of data came from my *epoche*, where I examined my own experience of a similar phenomenon from a prior year of teaching in another rural district.

### **Interviews**

The primary source of phenomenological data comes from the spoken or written work of the co-researcher (van Manen, 2014). The primary source of data for my study, therefore, came

from interviews. It was from interviews that I developed the textural and structural descriptions that allowed me to construct a composite of the structures, or essence of their experience (Moustakas, 1994). Interviews were recorded and transcribed using a digital transcribing tool.

### ***Seidman's Phenomenological Interview Protocol***

The phenomenological approach to interviewing is an attempt to understand as deeply as possible the participant's experience of the phenomenon as they subjectively interpret it (Seidman, 2019). Seidman's (2019) three-interview protocol drew on four themes of the phenomenological method: understanding the temporal and transitory nature of human experience, arriving at the participant's subjective understanding of the phenomenon, describing the lived experience as the foundation of the phenomenon, and emphasizing meaning and meaning in context (pp. 16-20).

At the time I conducted this study all schools in the state had been in lockdown since March 2020 because of the COVID-19 pandemic. In the interests of personal safety, all of my interviews were conducted online. I implemented Seidman's (2019) protocol, with one revision. I shortened the interview sessions to no more than 60 minutes. The reason for this change was that because teachers had been working in comprehensive distance learning environments where all instruction, student, and family interface was through online meeting platforms, there was the real possibility that co-researchers might experience "Zoom fatigue." My decision to shorten the interviews was intended to eliminate additional stress on the co-researchers.

**Interview One. Focused Life History.** During the first interview, Seidman (2019) recommended asking the co-researcher to relate their life history up to the point of their experience of the phenomenon. Using a semi-structured protocol, I asked each co-researcher to recount past personal and professional experiences. Since the topic of the study was the co-

researchers' experience of the professional agency, I focused how they came to be teachers, how they came to be teachers in the school district, and on their professional experiences at school.

(See Appendix A.)

**Interview Two. The Details of the Lived Experience of the Phenomenon.** During this interview I used broad interview questions I adapted from Moustakas (1994, p. 116). (See Appendix B.) The questions encouraged the co-researchers to describe their experience of the phenomenon by recalling their actions, memories, impressions, sensory perceptions, and emotional responses to it.

**Interview Three. Visualizations.** Part of my data collection involved creating a visual representation of my understanding of the co-researcher's narrated details of their experience of the phenomenon. I used a word cloud generator, Tag Word, which created a representation of the invariant horizons (Moustakas, 1994) from the second interview. During the third interview I asked the co-researchers to reflect on the meaning of their experience as I interpreted it through the visualization (See Appendix C.) The purpose of the visualization of the data was two-fold. First, it served as a member check, allowing the co-researcher to determine the accuracy of the themes as I understood them. Second, it allowed the co-researcher an open space, an opportunity to reflect on the meaning of the themes as I constructed them, to aid the "phenomenological reflection (that) involves the reduction" (van Manen, 2014, p. 218) of the meaning of the experience to its essence. Co-researchers were given the opportunity to meet with me virtually to discuss the word cloud, to talk about it in a phone call, email me their thoughts, or mark it up and send it to me as a scan with their own reflections, notes, and comments.

## Data Gathering

I gathered interview data through synchronous online platforms. I chose Zoom and Google Meet as these were the two digital meeting platforms the school district used. I and my co-researchers had great familiarity and expertise using both platforms. Both Zoom and Google Meet allowed me to see the co-researcher clearly, facilitating my ability to understand body language and read facial expressions. Teachers participated in interviews in places of their choosing that were comfortable to them, including living rooms and home office spaces.

Having received participant permission, I audio recorded all interviews using Otter.ai, a voice-to-text transcribing app that provided detailed transcriptions of recordings, including minutes and seconds time stamps. Otter allowed me to record, live transcribe, and share to other digital devices. This was useful since I could record on any digital device and then upload the transcript to my MacBook. By using Otter I was able to pay close attention to the teachers as they spoke. Taking notes could have disrupted the relationship between the participant and the researcher. Co-researchers might have felt objectified (Josselson, 2013). The ease of use of Otter allowed me to review transcriptions extensively using phenomenological reduction. I was able to play back the audio recordings at different speeds to take note not only of what each co-researcher said but also to analyze my own interviewing style.

The ability to review my interviewing style also allowed me to refine my interviewing technique, including considering the inclusion of “pocket questions” (Josselson, 2013, p. 51): additional questions that helped me understand more closely the phenomenological experience of the participant.

At the conclusion of each interview, audio transcripts were downloaded to secure digital files on my laptop. No other person had access to my laptop. The names of the co-researchers, as

well as any potential identifying markers, were pseudonymized. Downloaded transcripts were printed and coded for phenomenological reduction. All printed materials were kept in a securely locked location.

### **Personal Phenomenological Reduction Journal**

I kept a personal researcher's journal to analyze my phenomenological reduction as I worked through the phenomenological reduction process (Moustakas, 1994). By excluding my own interpretations of the co-researchers' experience, I approached the experience of the co-researcher with openness, seeking what was there, as the teachers' experience of professional agency presented itself to me.

### **Researcher Journal**

I maintained a researcher notebook to write down, reflect on, and analyze my own thoughts and feelings as I undertook the research project (Yin, 2016). As I was the main research instrument, the journal allowed me to examine any issues of reflexivity that arose and how these issues influenced my disposition towards the co-researchers and analysis of my findings (Yin, 2016).

### **Analytic Memos**

Every day I wrote analytic memos. Analytic memos were questions, conjectures, and reflections on the progress of the research, possible further lines of inquiry, refinements to my questioning strategies and techniques, and other information that came up during data analysis (Yin, 2016). Together with the personal phenomenological reduction journal and the researcher's journal, analytic memos guided my interpretation of the data.

### **Visual Data Folders**



Part of the data collection were visual representations, in the form of a word cloud, that I generated at the end of the second interview and that I shared with each co-researcher.

TagCrowd, the app I used, did not store any information I uploaded to the app. I downloaded the generated word clouds from TagCrowd and printed them. The printout for each co-researcher was securely stored in a separate folder for each teacher.

### Data Analysis through Phenomenological Reduction

The table below describes the steps of phenomenological reduction I used, as outlined by Moustakas (1994).

**Table 1**

*Moustakas's (1994) Stages of Phenomenological Reduction*

Stage	Description
1	The researcher conducts personal epoche
2	From personal epoche, record all relevant statements (horizontalization)
3	Record the meaning units of the experience (invariant horizons)
4	Relate the invariant statements into themes (clusters)
5	Synthesize the invariant themes into textural analyses of the experience ( <i>noema</i> )
6	Using imaginative variation, construct a description of the structures of the experience ( <i>noesis</i> )
7	Construct a textural-structural description of the meanings and essences of the experience
8	Conduct an analysis of each co-researcher's experience, beginning with stage one and continuing through stage seven
9	Construct a composite textural-structural description of the meanings and essences of the experiences of all co-researchers

I used Moustakas's (1994) modification of the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method of phenomenological data analysis (p. 121). I choose this modified analysis method because Moustakas (1994) delineated a step-by-step method for gathering and analyzing phenomenological data. For both my personal phenomenological reduction –*epoche* - and for those of the co-researchers, I followed the same analytical protocol.

### **Phenomenological Reduction of Co-Researcher Statements**

Once I obtained a full description of the co-researcher's phenomenological experience, first I generated a complete verbatim transcript.

Next, I examined co-researcher interviews line by line through the process of horizontalizing to consider the significance of each statement in regard to the experience.

Then, I recorded in a separate document all relevant statements. I listed each nonrepetitive statement to create the "invariant horizons" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 122) of the experience. Invariant horizons are the units of meaning within the experience.

After that, I clustered the invariant horizons thematically.

From there, I created a synthesis of the invariant themes to provide a textural description of the experience, including verbatim examples.

Using imaginative variation (Husserl, 1931/2017), I built *noematic* – or structural descriptions of the experience (Husserl, 1931/2017).

Next, I constructed a textural-structural description of the meanings – or essences – of the experience.

Finally, after completing the analysis of the phenomenological reduction of all the participants, I created a composite textural-structural description of the essences of their experience to arrive at a universal description of co-researchers' experience as a whole.

Phenomenological analysis uses noematic phasing during which the researcher continues to look, reflect, and consider again and again the textural and structural elements of the experience (Moustakas, 1994). Each new meaning uncovered a deeper meaning (Husserl, 1931/2017) that invited its own descriptions and understandings. The phenomenological reduction process allowed me and the co-researchers to come closer to “discerning the features of consciousness and arriving at an understanding of the essences of the experience” (Moustakas, 1994), which is the goal of a phenomenological study. Ultimately, the process led us to understand that “in the words, or perhaps better, *in spite of* the words, we (found) ‘memories’ that paradoxically we never thought or felt before” (van Manan, 1990, p. 25, emphasis in original).

### **Potential Insights from the Ecological Framework of Agency**

Phenomenology is a “*pure descriptive* discipline which studies the whole field of pure transcendental consciousness in the light of *pure intuition*” (Husserl, 1931/2017, p.176, emphasis in original). Its rejection of the natural attitude (Husserl, 1931/2017) puts the discipline of pure phenomenology outside the realm of the imposition of preexisting frameworks or conceptualizations of human experience. As a phenomenological researcher it would have been improper for me to structure the interviews through the lens of an existing theoretical framework.

With this caveat in mind, certain ecological themes and elements surfaced during the interviews that guided me to a deeper understanding of the essence of their experience. In Chapter Five I discuss the insights the ecological theory of agency contributed to understanding the essence of agency as perceived by the co-researchers.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

The purpose of this chapter was to describe the use of phenomenology as a research method, and to analyze its applicability to both of my research questions. I discussed the ethical considerations, research setting, and co-researcher recruitment. I outlined the specific procedures I used for collecting and analyzing interview data. The goal of Chapter Four is to provide the results from data using the phenomenological reduction model I described in Chapter Three.

## **Chapter Four: Findings**

This chapter contains the results of the phenomenological study I conducted to answer the research questions:

RQ 1: How do rural teachers perceive their achievement of individual professional agency as they participate in a school district mandated pedagogical reform?

RQ 2: What insights does an ecological framework of agency offer as rural teachers participate in a school district mandated pedagogical reform?

For my data collection and analysis I was guided by the procedures outlined by Moustakas (1994) in his analysis of phenomenological data. In presenting the data, I strove to preserve the unique voice of each experience by first presenting textural descriptions of the experience, as lived by each participant. At the conclusion of each textural description, I present a structural description of the phenomenon for the participant. I then offer a composite textural-structural description of the experience for all four co-researchers. Finally, I attempt to arrive at the essence, or true meaning of the experience for the co-researchers.

### **General Demographic Information**

The Acorn School District (pseudonym) is a rural district in the Pacific Northwest. The district comprises 400 square miles. Six small cities are within the school district boundaries. There are five schools in the district: one preschool, two elementary schools, one middle schools, and one high school. The administrative staff is made up of former teachers from the district who have been promoted throughout the years.

Most of the staff's educational experience has been in the Acorn School District. The average length of service for teachers employed by the district is about 15 years. Some of the newer staff were former pupils in the district. The staff is, for the most part, heavily involved in

the life of the community outside of school. Staff members serve with local civic groups, participate in small business partnerships with the district, and are members of the local arts scene. With few exceptions, district employees live within the parameters of the district. Their children, grandchildren, and extended family attend district schools. The high cost of living, the lack of housing, the unavailability of childcare and preschool options, and the 90-minute driving distance to the nearest urban center can present challenges to recruiting staff from outside the school district boundaries.

Table 1 provides information for each co-researcher in the study. Because of the location and small size of the district, all co-researchers, as well as the names of schools and the name of the district, were assigned pseudonyms.

**Table 2**

*Demographic Information about Co-Researchers*

Co-Researcher	Age	Number of Years Teaching	Number of Years in the District
Marion	Late 40s	26	22
Vicky	Early 40s	3.5	2
Phyllis	Early 50s	26	3
Erica	Mid 30s	13	3

**Anonymity**

I have strenuously taken every possible step to guarantee the co-researchers' anonymity to the best of my ability. Although this step is critical for all qualitative and quantitative research, in the case of conducting research in a small district it is even more critical. People in the Acorn School District know each other. They are related to each other. They work together. They are neighbors. Any perception of disloyalty on the part of the co-researchers or, as one teacher said,

of “barking too loudly,” could have had consequences for the personal and professional lives of the co-researchers.

During our interviews, the co-researchers laughed and cried. Their faces expressed pain, bewilderment, or bemusement as they recalled specific incidents related to the phenomenon. Sometimes their voices shook with rage. Sometimes they said they felt physically sick. As the interviews went on, the pauses between their words grew longer as they searched for just the right word or expression to convey their experiences. Many times, the co-researchers expressed guilt at what they were saying, but also relief that, as one co-researcher noted, “It could finally be said.”

### **Narratives**

Moustakas (1994) presented two ways to narrate the textural descriptions of a co-researcher’s experience of a phenomenon. The first way was to present a redacted, yet verbatim transcript of the co-researcher’s words. The second was to present the textural description in the form of a narrative constructed by the researcher that is supported by verbatim quotations from the participants.

While writing this chapter I struggled with the best way to present the textural descriptions of the participants’ experiences. At first, I was drawn to presenting them in the first way Moustakas (1994) presented. I wanted to guarantee that the teachers’ voices would be loud and strong, and not “messed” in any way by my rewriting of them. But given the size of the school district, and the closeness of the district community, I felt I might expose the participants identities inadvertently, risking causing them personal and professional harm. I have thus chosen to present my textural descriptions of the co-researchers experiences of the phenomenon in the form of narratives. I coded and recoded the series of transcripts and became so familiar with the

words, thoughts, and meanings that I was able to reconfigure the transcripts into forms that remained true to the meaning of the phenomenon as expressed to me by the teachers.

### **Marion's Textural Description of the Phenomenon**

Marion has worked in the Acorn School district for 22 years. Her previous professional development experiences were in an adjacent rural school district.

### **Marion's Prior Professional Development Experiences**

Before participating in Acorn's mandated reform, Academic English Acquisition (AEA), Marion's professional development experiences in her former school district focused on targeted professional growth based on student needs.

"It was amazing," she said. "The superintendent noticed that teachers were not taking any classes, so he brought in people from city universities to offer weekend and summer classes." Participant excitement was high, and classes were packed. Participants learned together and cooperated together in non-threatening environments where people depended on each other.

### **Participating in AEA Training**

For Marion, the opportunity to participate in AEA training offered an opportunity to experience once more a "mountaintop experience" of learning and growing. Although participants were required to give up three days of their summer break in late August, Marion sensed that most people were excited. "I heard several people – teachers with 30 plus years of experience – say that it was the best training they had ever had," she said. As Marion explained, there was a sense that "the district needed to do this to be on board" with the rest of the state.

At first, Marion was enthusiastic, eager to learn the new strategies in her classroom. It didn't take long before she felt overwhelmed. The training was not making sense. There was so much information over the course of three days that the "information just started going in and



going out.” She wondered how much she was going to be able to retain and implement. Marion found herself dealing with the usual back-to-school stress for teachers in getting the classroom ready and organized. AEA slipped to the back of her mind.

### **Implementation of AEA**

Once the school year began, it became clear to Marion that AEA had disappeared from the school’s narrative. Although Marion acknowledged that AEA, when implemented, “changed everything”, the “tricky part” was actually using the strategies faithfully and building on them, year by year. Marion enjoyed working with the in-house AEA coach, a former district teacher, who supported her with materials and ideas. Marion thought the in-house coach was “great, because she came into the classroom and she knew the kids. She knew where I was coming from. Marion felt that over time she would be able to implement AEA with the support of the in-district coach and her “amazing grade-level team.” Marion looked forward to taking a leadership position in the school as a key implementer of AEA.

### **The Building Administrator and Outside Consultant**

In late fall the building administrator told Marion and the teaching staff that an outside consultant had been hired ensure AEA implementation compliance by conducting classroom walkthroughs with the building administrator. The consultant, who the staff had never met, and the administrator had checklists to see if Marion and the others were “hitting the targets.”

“The consultant and the administrator were best friends,” Marion said. “It felt high school-ish. I had the feeling it was them against us.” Marion had to set goals for the consultant and the administrator, but the goals were not tied to her teaching evaluation. Marion felt that the reform was being “shoved down my throat.” The consultant told Marion that she was going to be

videotaped implementing the strategies, and then be critiqued in front of the rest of the staff.

Marion recalled,

I actually threw a fit. I felt things were forced and shoved down our throat and it did not make sense and we did not have a voice at all. And I was very frustrated and angry and I don't do well when I feel manipulated. I came out with claws, and it was not my best moment and I was embarrassed by it. Just thinking about it now, my stomach is kind of sick.

Although Marion acknowledged that the intention was “probably to make us better teachers”, the spirit and purpose of AEA was lost. Prior to the announcement, videotaping had never been conducted in the school. Marion recollected that the consultant told her, “We’ll tell you what you’re doing wrong, and what’s good for you.” Everything now was coming down from the top. “They just wanted everyone to be the same,” Marion said. “They pushed us down. It was a control thing. All of my years of experience were disregarded.”

### **Collegial Relationships**

As the school year continued, Marion continued to feel pressure from the building administrator and the outside consultant to participate in videotaping lessons and conforming to expectations. Marion felt increasingly alienated. She was alarmed at the negative culture developing among staff members, saying, “Those staff members who conformed to the expectations placed on them by the administrator and the consultant were praised. It was like they were pitting us against each other.”

After two years, the outside consultant no longer came, and the building administrator abandoned the walk-throughs. AEA disappeared. Marion regretted that it had gone away, but didn't miss the stress and pressure. Without the pressures of conformity and competition, Marion

could enjoy better relationships between her and some of her colleagues. “I work with an amazing team,” she said. “We lean on each other a lot and that hasn’t happened in a long time. It’ll be okay. Whatever happens next, we’ll kind of go through it together.”

### **Structural Description of Marion’s Experience of the Phenomenon**

Marion’s professional development experiences before participating in AEA were a time of energy and collegiality, support and understanding, and cooperation and learning with peers. The structures of these iterational experiences determined her expectations for what effective professional development would look like, as they activated her sense of professional agency, allowing her to feel purposeful, energized, and respected professionally.

As a 22-year veteran in the Acorn District, Marion felt that her standing in the community and her dedication to professional improvement would allow her to make sense of the AEA training. More than that, Marion assumed that her long years of classroom experience, her partnership with the in-district coach, and her close-knit ties with other staff members would make her a school leader and model in its implementation.

The arrival of the outside consultant in the fall marked a deep pivotal moment in Marion’s teaching career. Marion resented the consultant’s attitude and feeling as if her professionalism as a teacher was being put down and belittled. The building administrator seemed to have abandoned and betrayed the staff. Marion felt that the structures of her professional self were being deliberately stripped away by someone she didn’t know or trust, in service to something she didn’t understand and from which she was excluded. The stripping away of her professional agency became a metaphor for Marion’s existence in the school. Marion forgot the whole purpose of the AEA training as she fought to preserve her reputation

and self-respect. Every day brought a new battle of wills between Marion and the forces of control, conformity, and power.

Although she acknowledged that AEA could offer powerful strategies to use with her students, what Marion remembered the most about AEA was the daily stress her sense of professionalism endured during the two years of its implementation. One unexpected benefit was that the bonding she had originally hoped for at the beginning of the implementation came to fruition through mutual adversity. Marion and some trusted colleagues came to build a tightly-knit unity that buffered, supported, and sustained them.

### **Vicky's Textural Description of the Phenomenon**

Vicky has worked in the Acorn School district for two years. Her previous experiences in education were working in a rural district in a Western state.

### **Vicky's Prior Professional Development Experiences**

When she was offered her teaching position in the middle of June, Vicky learned she would participate in mandatory AEA training just two weeks later. Vicky viewed it as an opportunity not just to help her grow professionally but also to grow as part of a staff. Her prior professional development experiences had been attending a one-day conference put on by a curriculum publishing company. "I know they were in it to make money," Vicky explained, "but I still learned a lot and it was a good experience."

### **Participation in AEA Training**

As the time came to go to the two full-day AEA training, Vicky was excited and scared at the same time. "There was no one else going from my school," she said, since everyone else had already received the training. On the first day of training, as she made the three-hour round-trip drive to the training site in another county, Vicky reflected on how grateful she was for the

opportunity to attend, and how impressed she was by the effort the two trainers made to be organized, welcoming, and practical.

Two hours in on the second day, however, Vicky began to feel disorganized and confused. "I didn't have a lot of prior background knowledge and so I didn't really know how to apply what they were teaching us," she said. The materials seemed geared toward older elementary, middle, and high school students, which made Vicky struggle since she would be teaching early elementary grades. Vicky also felt intimidated by the experienced teachers in the room who were participating in the training. She felt she had to explain her actions and thoughts to the others to justify her presence among them. "I wanted to learn from them, I wanted them to know that I admired them and respected them," she said. At the conclusion of the training, Vicky went home with a binder full of strategies and ideas she promised to herself she would review during the summer. She felt sure AEA would be the topic of conversation once the school year began in the fall. She looked forward to being part of a welcoming, progressive, experienced school staff led by an innovative administrator. She had so much she wanted to learn about being a good teacher and was confident that, with the support of her colleagues, AEA would be a strong set of strategies she could add to her "limited repertoire."

### **Implementation of AEA**

In September, in the hectic rush of putting her classroom together, understanding the student schedules, and reading student profiles, Vicky noticed that no one asked her about the training. She assumed that it was because the other staff had already done the training, and it was just some sort of requirement. "What I'm thinking is that the principal would prefer us to be knowledgeable in it, but it was never brought up," she said. Conscientiously Vicky attempted to introduce strategies and techniques from the training, but she was overwhelmed by her

responsibilities as a new teacher in a new school. As time went on, she realized the AEA training had just been something to be checked off a list. It was never really part of any school-wide conversation, follow-up training, or professional goal-setting. The expectations of whether to implement the training were never discussed or communicated clearly by the building administrator or more experienced members of staff.

### **The Building Administrator and the Outside Consultant**

In November, an outside consultant whom no one knew came to the school. She asked the building administrator to recruit a member from each teaching team to make a video demonstrating AEA strategies. The staff would watch the video and critique it. Teachers were given two weeks to plan and videotape a lesson.

Vicky didn't have the impression that the building administrator had a good relationship with the consultant. "I remember her saying, 'Oh, by the way, so-and-so is coming,'" Vicky said. The building administrator and the consultant told the staff they wouldn't be evaluated on the outcome of the video, but Vicky had the sense that they would be.

Vicky found the mood among the staff hostile upon receiving the news. There was a lot of protest from one or two staff members who complained so much that others followed suit. Anytime someone tried to be enthusiastic they were shut down.

Vicky thought the building administrator was weak. She felt that it was a principal's job to assert her authority. There was pushback, a lot of grumbling, and the two male teachers on Vicky's grade-level team critiqued the principal behind closed doors. Vicky, who longed for the camaraderie of a teaching team, struggled to remain positive and polite. "When you're in a team you want to be loyal," she explained.

### **Collegial Relationships**

The building administrator approached the most experienced teacher on Vicky's team to make the video, but he refused to do it. "He should have gone forward, it should have been an experienced teacher," Vicky said. Vicky felt she had to be the one to make the video. "I couldn't say 'no'," she said. "I felt I was being pushed. I went along with it, but it was embarrassing. I didn't have the courage to refuse." Vicky tried to be confident and not worry. "I really did try," she said. "It had so many errors in it." She doesn't remember if she used any of the AEA strategies. As the video was playing before the rest of the staff, she felt overwhelmed by shame. Looking for the bright side, she said, "I did learn quite a bit. I learned to be more brave. I'm quite a go-getter that way."

In the spring, the in-district coach came to work with teams on implementing the reform. What she said was rejected by the other two people on Vicky's team. Vicky recalls their attitude was, "Fine, we'll let you talk but we don't like what you're saying and you need to go." After the coach left the meetings, Vicky remembered her teammates attacked the coach and made fun of her. As the only woman on the team, Vicky grew increasingly uncomfortable. One of the male teachers began shutting the door after these meetings, with just the three of them in a small room. She had to insist that the door remain open. "He was so controlling," she said. "He didn't have a good character." Vicky explained, "It's detrimental to everybody, and we all sort of suffer with someone like that."

After the videotaping session and the infrequent visits of the in-district coach, AEA was never discussed again. It very abruptly came and then it abruptly left. There was no sense of prioritizing it, and no sense of excitement. "It wasn't like, oh, I really love this, or this has worked out so well or I see a path forward for growth," Vicky said.

“It should have been an experience where it was important to everybody.” Vicky added. “It was never part of our personal or professional goals.

Vicky paused for a long time. She concluded, “I really don’t remember anything good about it.”

### **Structural Description of Vicky’s Experience of the Phenomenon**

For Vicky, a good part of feeling at home in a school had to do with the satisfaction and security from being part of a school led by a strong administrator and experienced, professional colleagues. For her, the chance to participate in AEA would not necessarily put her on equal footing with the other teachers but it would open the door to new opportunities to collaborate and grow. She had always struggled with self-confidence, feeling intimidated by other, more experienced teachers whom she seemed to not only respect, but revere. Naturally shy, she nevertheless began imagining how she would come to the school as part of a kind and supportive team who would encourage her and guide her. She was looking forward to being forced out of her comfort zone, pushed to try something out, and learn from that experience.

Vicky soon became aware of the impotency of the building administrator. The real power brokers in the school – two of whom were on Vicky’s team – controlled the decisions the building administrator made. These teachers not only refused to implement AEA, but displayed a contemptuous attitude towards the principal, the outside consultant, the in-district AEA coach, and anyone else affiliated with it. Vicky tried to make sense of the situation by remaining positive, polite, and assuming best intentions.

It was only when she felt her physical and mental safety were in danger during closed-door team meetings that Vicky found the strength to stand up to the male teachers on her team. It



was her increased sense of personal vulnerability that allowed her to take stock of her professional vulnerability and make changes in her day-to-day life in the school.

Vicky became aware of two things. She had to try to make the best of the situation in the school. She had no one to rely on but herself. No one would protect her, much less guide her or encourage her. She also had to come to grips with the fact that her hopes and dreams for working in that school were illusory. No one cared about AEA. No one seemed to care about anything at all, except opposing what was presented and destroying anyone who tried to follow what, for Vicky, was the right path.

Vicky's initial reverence for her older, more experienced school colleagues passed through stages of feeling bewildered, compliant, and fearful. Finally, Vicky found the only way forward was to follow a quiet, invisible middle ground. Her sense of professional agency would come perhaps by trying to lead by showing a good example to others, and finding what positive opportunities for growth she could on her own.

### **Phyllis's Textural Description of the Phenomenon**

Phyllis has worked in the Acorn School district for three years. Her previous experience was working for 26 years in a large, diverse, urban school district 95 miles away.

### **Phyllis's Previous Professional Development Experiences**

Phyllis's professional development experiences in her former school district centered on continual training in equity, diversity, and inclusion. Phyllis knew that these previous training experiences had left a mark on her teaching. "We had to respond to kids who came from different backgrounds, instead of having just one way," she said. "As a teacher you have to understand that how we teach goes much deeper than just the curriculum." Phyllis served on many school leadership teams, and parents had requested that she be their children's teacher.

Half Korean, Phyllis felt she was able to connect to some of the students because of her background and ethnicity. Phyllis also felt her own culture helped her bond deeply with parents. “I loved working with the parents,” she said. “In my old school district I had a good rapport with families and parents. That’s one of my strengths.”

### **Participating in AEA Training**

Phyllis viewed the mandatory AEA training as an opportunity not to be missed. She welcomed the idea of adding new strategies to her repertoire, but also looked forward to the chance to meet and work with her colleagues in an environment outside of school. Hired in May, she had not had the opportunity to really get to meet her new colleagues or to have the opportunity to make a connection with them. Although the three-day training took place right before the other customary mandatory trainings before the beginning of the school year in August, Phyllis had no complaints about giving up three days of her summer vacation. “Some people complained,” she said, “because the training took three days, but I like that kind of stuff.” Phyllis felt that AEA offered a different perspective on how to improve academic language in students. “I can’t think of any other program where you use some of those strategies,” she said. “It helps all students learn. It also helps teachers stay focused on what’s important.” Phyllis also felt that the training made sense. “I think the pieces connected for me because I had so much background from before.”

Most of all, Phyllis enjoyed the chance to be working in a large group of colleagues outside of the school building. “People were excited, people were talking, there was a lot of energy,” she recalled. She also enjoyed the presenters. “They were congenial, lively,” she said. At the end of the third day of training, Phyllis was excited. “I got to learn new things, I got to work with my colleagues in different ways,” she said. “We talked and laughed, we ate lunch

together, we planned out some ideas for what we were going to do.” It was with this sense of enthusiasm that Phyllis began the school year. She had a new set of strategies to implement and new-found friendships among her colleagues to look forward to.

### **Implementation of AEA**

Once the school year began, Phyllis noticed that a lot of the collegiality and energy from the training had disappeared. Also gone were any attempts to implement AEA. “Something like reading and math, that’s on the report card,” Phyllis said, “but AEA isn’t. It’s not something that’s scored, for people to see.”

As a result, much of AEA faded. Phyllis attempted to implement some strategies for a while, but eventually gave up. “I think you need to meet on it,” she said. “You need to meet, at least a few times in September through December. You need support and you need to keep it going. It needs to be part of your conversations.” Because AEA was a district-wide initiative, Phyllis felt that the building administrator was under pressure from the superintendent to “at least pretend” the staff was implementing AEA. For a while, the administrator came into classrooms to see proof that AEA strategies were being used. Phyllis felt that what teachers did in the classroom was for show. “I mean, we knew she’d be dropping by, so we’d put up our sentence frames and learning targets,” she said. When she tried to include equity statements in her learning targets, she recalls the building administrator was dismissive. ““You don’t need all this,”” Phyllis remembered her saying. Phyllis laughed. “I really didn’t understand the point of anything we were doing,” she said.

### **The Building Administrator and the Outside Consultant**

In November, an unknown outside consultant came in to the school to set AEA implementation goals. Phyllis had only a few clear memories of her. “One of them – the more

longer-hair gal – I can't remember her name – she came in a couple of times," she recalled. What overshadowed her recollection was the reaction of her team members and the teachers to the consultant. "I felt everything was straying toward the negative," she said. "It was a real negative mood." Phyllis recalled that the other teachers in the building were hostile to the point of being mutinous. When the building administrator announced that there would be classroom walkthroughs and videotaping, the two male teachers on her team made a point of showing their disrespect toward the consultant by yawning, talking over her, and in some cases, getting up and leaving the meeting. In one meeting, Phyllis wanted to share an idea she had for implementing an AEA strategy. One of her teammates stood up and announced, "I'm not going to spend another 10 minutes in a meeting for anything like this," and left the room. Most of the people looked at those meetings with the consultant as "free planning time." The building administrator did not seem able to rein in staff behavior. "The direction needs to come from the top," Phyllis said. "Every single educator needs to be on board." But for the administrator, AEA just seemed to be one more thing that she was being forced to do because of her evaluation status with the superintendent. The administrator fell into tacitly condoning those staff members who chose to ignore the implementation.

### **Collegial Relationships**

As the school year ground on, Phyllis found herself unable to connect to any staff member to try to make sense of what was happening with AEA. She found that when she tried to make a change in her classroom, or try to make a connection with another colleague to talk about how confused she felt, she was mocked and derided. "I kept trying to figure out what I was doing wrong, what I was saying wrong," she said. She identified a group of teachers, whom she called "The Big Three," who ran the school and ultimately were the ones who decided what the staff

would be doing. "They were always complaining they had too much to do," Phyllis said. "I think if one of them had told the principal AEA was important we would have focused on it more."

The *Big Three*'s influence extended beyond classroom walls. Phyllis felt the cliquishness of the school made her unable to trust anyone. "You don't know who's friends with who," she said. It was painful when, during staff meetings, one of the *Big Three* would send a humorous text to others on the staff. Phyllis's name was never on the list. The *Big Three* organized lunchtime walks but Phyllis was never invited. She was especially leery when she saw how The *Big Three* treated the in-district coach who had been assigned to make sure AEA implementation was being followed. Phyllis saw her as a fellow victim and tried to establish a rapport with her. "She had been a teacher like us, and no one welcomed her here, not at all," she said. "They were big snobs, the way they treated her." Feeling tarred by association, Phyllis ended up retreating into her classroom. "I know the principal hears things about me all the time," she said. "But what do you say if people you work with don't like you?"

Feeling victimized and confused by the professional path she found herself on, Phyllis nevertheless tried to remain philosophical. She said that she was counting the years until her retirement and that she and her husband were deciding what their next steps would be. "I'm trying to be less sensitive, but I'm just drowning. But this time will pass. You can't let it gnaw away at you."

She added, "Isn't it strange? After almost 30 years as a teacher, here I am. I'm trying to define me."

### **Structural Description of Phyllis's Experience of the Phenomenon**

Three years ago Phyllis experienced culture shock, in many senses of the term.

Half Korean, having spent most of her career teaching in a major city, Vicky now found herself unable to fit in to the established status quo at her new school. In her previous district she had been part of the school and greater community, admired, respected, and sought after for her ideas and teaching methods. In this rural school community she couldn't seem to be herself professionally.

She now experienced a sense of longing, a desire to connect with, to belong with students, parents, and most especially with colleagues as she imagined and reimagined how her life as a person and a professional could be better. For Phyllis, her role as a professional educator was almost entirely dependent on her acceptance by her peers in the school community.

Regarding her self in relation to her professional role at school, Phyllis was attuned to the words, gestures, and actions of those in the building around her, especially her principal and her grade level team members. Every day she spent large amounts of time rehashing, rethinking, reanalyzing what had happened around her, and how those deeds affected her directly or indirectly, personally or professionally. What seemed to strike Phyllis the most about AEA implementation was that she had spent most of her time obsessing about how others in the school perceived her as a person and professionally.

Phyllis felt that there were a few teachers on staff who wielded the real power in the school, telling the principal what to do, bullying the rest of the staff, and belittling anyone who contradicted them. Phyllis made her strongest connections to the in-district coach. The coach offered her a respite from having to explain herself to others or to feel on guard against how others perceived her.

Now approaching the end of her professional career, Phyllis was in a state of professional disequilibrium. Unhappy in her job, her personal needs and longings consuming most of her time

in the classroom, Phyllis was at a loss to know how she would move forward. She could never give up the hope of being a part of her school community. Her identity as a professional was bound up with her need to give and be given to.

Phyllis's hope when moving to the small Acorn community had been that she would not just be accepted, but welcomed, taken in, and nurtured. Naturally outgoing and gregarious, Phyllis felt puzzled by the callous, often brutal, and exclusionary treatment she experienced from her colleagues. As her time in the school increased, she seemed to be especially sensitive to any indication of being ostracized or harassed. If not accepted in the school community, if not included in the small little social things that made working bearable – jokes, laughter, friendly conversation, impromptu walks outside - then her sense of professional agency could not be realized.

### **Erica's Textural Description of the Phenomenon**

Erica has worked in the Acorn School District for three years. Before coming to Acorn, she worked in a variety of urban and school districts in the Pacific Northwest.

### **Erica's Previous Professional Development Experiences**

"I gobbled it up, I gobbled everything up!" Erica exclaimed as she thought back on her previous professional development experiences, adding, "Isn't everything exciting in your first years as a teacher?"

Thirteen years ago, Erica began her teaching career in a large, diverse urban school district about 90 miles southeast of Acorn. Admitting she had not been a very good student in college, she remembered that when she graduated from college in 2008 there were only "about three teaching positions in the entire state." To this day she marveled her good fortune not just at finding a teaching job, but finding one that did so much to improve her professionally.

In her first years of teaching Erica immediately felt immersed in a culture of ongoing professional development and professional responsibility that not just her building staff, but the entire district seemed to drench itself in. “I was part of a mentor program, a really cool mentor program. We would go monthly to these meetings and through it we got to have a sense of a professional development community,” Erica recalled. Erica remembered her mentor teacher as “superb, a very well respected, very good teacher.” Erica enjoyed the deeply collaborative process that allowed and encouraged even new teachers to explore new ways of teaching and learning, to deepen their practice, and to take risks.

Then came the district-sponsored opportunity to earn her endorsement in teaching English to speakers of other languages (ESOL). Erica recalled in detail many key moments of the experience that lasted just one year but that made the biggest impact on her career. It was the experience of working collaboratively with like-minded, highly focused, and extremely dedicated teachers that she recalled when she said,

The endorsement was unique. The classes were useful, interesting, and overwhelming in the amount of content. You’re already teaching. I was the designated lead teacher in my school. I was really passionate, really excited. I couldn’t believe I was getting this opportunity. I would stay for hours, doing everything I needed to do to learn the strategies and implement them. We worked in cohorts. We learned from each other. Not everyone gets an experience that way.

As Erica continued in her teaching career, she was recognized by each district she worked in as an expert in the acquisition of English for students who spoke language other than English.



### **Participation in AEA Training**

Hired in the Acorn District in the spring, Erica learned she would have to attend the mandatory AEA training in late summer before school started. Erica struggled to keep an open mind about the training. “Any kind of training is a good reminder that those strategies are good teaching,” she said. After sitting for three days in a cold cafeteria, listening to things she’d not only heard about but already successfully implemented over the course of 10 years, she became annoyed and frustrated. “I had the endorsement, and all my prior experience, and I was bringing that to the table. I was told it was something I had to sit through, so I did,” she remembered. Erica hoped that, come the start of school, she would be called on to demonstrate her expertise and leadership in AEA-related strategies.

### **Implementation of AEA**

“Did we even meet about AEA that year?” Erica wondered. As she reflected on the implementing AEA school-wide, Erica drew a blank. “I kind of remember there were really long days where they pulled us out of our classrooms and got us a sub,” she said. What she mostly remembered was the stress. After two months of not talking about AEA, in November, with the arrival of an outside consultant, all of a sudden she felt she was being thrust into the forefront of demonstrating what successfully using AEA looked like. The experience of having the building administrator, outside consultant, and colleagues walk through her classroom caused her to second-guess herself. Erica felt she had something to prove – to her colleagues, because she had spoken to them about her previous work experiences, and to herself. When thinking about AEA, what Erica remembered was the clipboards. “Everyone came into my classroom, and check check check check. For me, that’s what it felt like. I did this. You check it off your list.” Erica never saw the purpose of AEA. She questioned who had set the goal for all-staff AEA

training, and why. Designed to target students learning English as another language, Erica didn't see that the demographics supported the training. It was her impression that the building administrator went along with the implementation because of her rocky relationship with the superintendent.

### **The Building Administrator and the Outside Consultant**

Erica was asked by the building administrator to videotape a lesson using AEA strategies. The outside consultant, the administrator, and the school staff watched and critiqued the video, helped Erica set a professional goal, and then asked the rest of the staff to also set an AEA teaching goal. Although Erica enjoyed the opportunity to "talk professionally" with the outside consultant, recalling the videotaping, Erica said, "It was all just putting on a show. I did this, and so how did I do, and how did Erica do everyone, and what's your feedback for Erica?" Erica liked the consultant and enjoyed talking with her. Even so, she found the whole experience "weird." She thought it was strange getting feedback from someone she didn't have a relationship with. Caustically she said, "I don't recall if I had an epiphany, or anything like that. I don't think that I did."

Although frustrated with AEA, she never considered the idea of talking about her feelings with the building administrator. "It's not my personality," she explained. "And what would have been the point? I mean, what would she say? 'Thank you for letting me know, Erica, now go away, Erica.' I want my boss to respect me and my opinion."

Erica reflected on the past 10 years of her teaching career – the bulk of it – that she saw as defined as constantly seeking validation as a teacher. "Other than the first three years, I've never had a minute where I wasn't feeling evaluated, measured against rubrics," she said. Erica

continued, "I'd really like to have some feedback tied to something I'm working on. That's what I'm seeking. I don't have the opportunity."

### **Collegial Relationships**

There were a few teachers in the school whom Erica admired and with whom she would have liked to partner. She felt that these teachers would push her to the next level professionally. Working with these teachers, Erica said she would feel "more respected, not dumb." She perceived these teachers as having the real authority in the school, teachers whom the building administrator admired and elevated. "It's very clear that these people are the principal's pets," Erica said. Erica said she "craves" working with these teachers, and she wants to be respected like they are. She would not, however, ask the building administrator to be reassigned to their team. "I'm fearful of authority, and I always have been," she said. She also commented on what she perceived as payback for those who did speak up against administrative decisions, saying that people who "barked too loudly" were made to "pay the price."

As time has passed, and AEA is no longer mentioned in the school, Erica has resigned herself to staying in the Acorn District. She allowed herself a few minutes to daydream about other career possibilities outside of education: running a landscaping business, working outdoors. Accepting the futility of these musings, Erica acknowledged that, as the primary breadwinner in her family, and with her options for finding another teaching position in her rural area so few, she had no option except to make the best of her current situation. Realizing that Erica her position in the school hierarchy was fixed and static, she said, "I know my place. Just shut up and teach."

### **Structural Description of Erica's Experience of the Phenomenon**

The experience of being a teacher – of being a fully-immersed professional striving to learn as much as she could – was felt by Erica as an intense and permeating reality during the first three years of her teaching career.

Graduating with a degree in elementary teaching, Erica was grateful and disbelieving that she was able to secure a teaching position in a large culturally and linguistically diverse school district during the great economic downturn in the United States in 2008. Erica remembered that during her first three years of teaching she wanted to not just succeed at her craft, but excel at it.

Erica spent the first 10 years of her career working in low-income schools in greater metropolitan areas. The schools she worked in had high numbers of students and families who were culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD). Working in closely-knit teacher cohorts, she was encouraged by her administrators to take risks, seek out best practices, and go deep into whatever she tried. Passionate, excited, she outgrew her districts, looking for the next opportunity to grow her craft.

When Erica moved with her family to Acorn's small rural district, she wasn't prepared to have to take her training and experience back to level zero. She had been hired because of the depth of her training and experience working with students who were CLD. Fearful of authority, and nervous about losing her new job, Erica chose to not advocate professionally for herself based on her deep, successful professional experiences. She retreated into herself, and although there were a few people she wanted to team with, she did not want to ask the principal for fear of being confrontational, of knowing her place, of seeing what happened to other people who spoke up.

Erica liked the opportunity to meet with the outside consultant. This was perhaps not so much that the consultant had new things to teach her, but because the consultant represented an outside voice, a different perspective, a different way of phrasing things. But when it came right down to it, what the consultant offered was business as usual: putting on the show, having checkmarks on an evaluation rubric. Without anyone to push Erica to the next level of teaching, to make her think and work, she retreated into silence.

Erica spent months trying to understand the culture of the school. She felt bewildered by the mixed messages, of being told she was an innovative teacher when people came in the room, and then being told to toe the policy line of implementing curriculum with fidelity. The principal instead insisted on making sure everyone followed her rules. Erica felt the school culture was disconnected from anything real, relevant, or professionally meaningful.

The opportunity to work with like-minded, intellectually curious, and passionate teachers had been something Erica sought since her early teaching days. The preferential treatment given by the principal to a couple of teachers, and the unwillingness of the principal to take risks because of her own relationship with the superintendent, cast a pall on Erica's enthusiasm for teaching.

Stuck in what seems to be more and more of an unfulfilling job, the implication is that Erica is lost. She seems unable to generate the previous enthusiasm that drove her passion as a professional educator and with those previous inner experiences that defined her as a professional. Unheard, unseen, and unremarkable in her perception of herself as a teacher in the Acorn District, unable to use her experience and knowledge to self-direct her own professional path, Erica's insistence that she didn't care anymore is perhaps an acknowledgement of the approaching dead-end to the professional road she currently finds herself on.

### **Composite Textural-Structural Description of the Phenomenon**

In the composite textural-structural description, or synthesis, of the four teachers' perception of the achievement of professional agency, I merged the textural and structural descriptions of the phenomenon to arrive at the essence of the teachers' experience of professional agency as they participated in the mandated pedagogical reform.

### **Agentic Acceptance from Past Experiences**

The initial years of teaching for Marion, Vicky, Phyllis, and Erica were a time of excitement, wonder, and joy. Immersed in being part of a new staff, a new school, working with new colleagues and excited at the possibility of being led by capably, competent, and caring administrators, they devoured any and all learning opportunities that came their way. They did not see themselves as passive actors in their schools but as active contributors who had choices about what they wanted to learn and how they would learn it.

Their learning was immediately applicable and constantly regenerative. Although the depth and breadth of the experiences varied among the co-researchers, certain themes stood out that characterized their sense of the achievement of agency. The first was the theme of choice. All of the co-researchers said that when it came time to participating in professional development, the choice of the classes and subjects they participated in was up to them. The second theme was that of unity. Behind every professional development decision, there was the expectation that everyone in the school or district would be participating in some kind of new learning that would be applicable to the co-researchers' actual classrooms and school settings. Another theme was that of collaboration. All four co-researchers spoke of working in teams, being supported by peers and administrators, and depending on each other to learn and grow.

At the beginning of their careers, the co-researchers did not have the experience and wisdom to consciously analyze how their schools, administrators, and colleagues were contributing to their achievement of professional agency. The co-researchers, however, did perceive that the sense of how the work they were doing was being defined within the shifting contexts of their day-to-day work. Although unable to consciously survey their professional growth dispassionately at the time, in hindsight all four co-researchers drew upon their prior teaching experiences and professional development experiences to set up the parameters of what the achievement of professional agency would mean and look like to them in the future. They sought the opportunity to decide what kind of professional development would be most meaningful to them at that particular point in their career. They wanted to be included in school-level conversations about how best to serve students. They wanted to feel part of a professional collaborative community that encouraged risk-taking, creativity, and experimentation.

As time went on, the four co-researchers made the deliberate decision to move from those initial districts to their current assignment within the Acorn School District. For two of the co-researchers, Phyllis and Erica, the move took them from living and working in large, multicultural, urban settings to working in a predominantly White, rural one. For Vicky and Marion, the move was from other rural districts. At some point in their current educational setting, the four co-researchers realized with a growing awareness that their former beliefs about agentic professionalism were not aligned to what they were experiencing as teachers in their new schools. It was the multiday AEA professional development training that seemed to offer a glimpse to the co-researchers of the differences between their past and current experiences of the achievement of professional agency.

**Initial Agentic Anticipation**

For all four co-researchers, the full days of AEA training began initially with varying degrees of professional agentic anticipation. News of the mandated training brought forth reactions ranging from acknowledging there might be something new to be gleaned from the experience, to a kindling of excitement that the district would be on board with current conversations around the state, to recreating the long-ago heady days of engaged, thoughtful professionals discussing important social themes and ideas learning and leaning on each other, and to the opportunity to learn and create alongside more seasoned and experienced professionals.

At the beginning of the first day, the four women felt interest, joy, excitement, and some nervousness as they wondered what they might be learning. What would the trainers be like? Who would they sit with? What would they learn and be asked to do? Throughout the day, the women worked hard to bring their prior experience and knowledge to the table in order to participate as full professionals immersed in new learning.

**Agentic Alienation**

As the first day ended, and the remaining training days loomed on the horizon, the women noticed a shift in their perception of agentic capacity. The sense of agentic anticipation, generated by learning new strategies, participating in group activities, collaborating with colleagues, and dreaming of implementing what had been learned, degenerated fairly quickly into a feeling of agentic alienation. The co-researchers felt bored, confused, intimidated, or overwhelmed during the multi-day training sessions. Although the co-researchers appreciated the liveliness and energy of the presenters, their own agentic capacity began to diminish as they felt disconnected from truly understanding the material or being able to visualize what implementing



it would look like once in the classroom. The amount of material was either overwhelming and confusing, or repetitive and unstimulating. Three of the co-researchers felt disorganized, unable to build what they were hearing on to their past experiences. They struggled to understand and connect how what they were learning could be applicable to their classrooms and students. They began to doubt whether they would be able to apply what they were learning and felt that perhaps ultimately it was a waste of time to participate in a multi-day training session that might have been better if it had extended throughout the year. For all of the co-researchers, the perception of professional agency during the training was marked by frustration and gradually tuning out what they were hearing.

The timing of the training, either at the end of summer, or scheduled before the normal district-wide three busy days of professional development in late August, didn't allow the co-researchers to have time to absorb the material or use it to help guide their lessons. The initial sense of agentic anticipation – being able to learn something new, make sense of it, apply it, and act on it – gave way to a sense of passivity. Perhaps exactly how and why they would be asked to implement AEA would be made clear to them once school started. Their sense of agentic anticipation was put on hold. The teachers became passive spectators, wondering what would happen next.

### **Agentic Amnesia**

Once the school year began, the teachers were rapidly pulled into the normal busyness of school. As the first few weeks of school progressed, the co-researchers described feelings of confusion, forgetfulness, and a lack of clarity about what they were supposed to do with the new training. They dutifully attempted to incorporate strategies into their day-to-day teaching as they juggled implementing curricular mandates that took precedent over AEA, but there was never

any school level or grade level conversation about what it was they were supposed to be doing. Their perception of themselves as agentic professionals implementing new knowledge, skills, and strategies to address the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse learners never came to fruition because of AEA's lack of priority.

### **Agentic Guilt**

The small number of students who were CLD in the schools caused the co-researchers to wonder why exactly they had had the training to begin with. With no understanding of how to apply AEA to one or two students in their classrooms, the co-researchers' sense of guilt at not implementing the strategies was felt as intense and permeating the reality of their professional agency. Over time their feelings of guilt gave way to indifference. There was no sense of excitement, no sense of urgency. Immersed in the familiar and complex weave of daily life in the classroom, the women grew into their daily routines, schedules, and responsibilities. As it was never part of their professional evaluation, like math or reading, it was easy to forget about AEA until someone from the outside world came in to remind them of it.

### **Agentic Suppression**

From late August until early November AEA was never part of school conversations, staff meetings, grade-level meetings, or school improvement goals. The teachers' perception of the achievement of agency in regard to implementing AEA was suppressed because the teachers were never asked to activate it. No one in the school, including the building administrators, seemed interested in AEA. It was a requirement everyone had to go through, and without AEA being a focal point for school improvement, it was quickly forgotten. Over the fall there was no immediate application of the professional development training to actual classroom needs, and as AEA was just another one of several new district-wide data-driven initiatives that year, it was

easy for the co-researchers to forget the training had ever occurred. The initiative came, and it went. Suppression of agentic capacity in implementing the reform became a part of the teachers' everyday life at school. The teachers forgot that AEA even existed. Agentic alienation gave way to agentic amnesia in regard to AEA.

### **Agentic Rejection**

In early November, the four co-researchers received a mental and physical shock. After a period of about 12 weeks when AEA had not even been part of the school conversation, the teachers were told an outside consultant from a national coaching institute would be visiting the schools to observe AEA being implemented in classrooms. The consultant would be working with the building administrators to set school-wide AEA goals.

At first the teachers tried to pull out what they could remember about the training, reviewing how to set goals, construct sentence frames, and provide other scaffolding materials. They tried to reconcile implementing at least a couple of strategies to please the consultant, drawing on their agentic capacity as professionals to review materials, to pull out the training manual, and develop some physical evidence of the strategy implementation to post around their classrooms. It was when they learned that they were going to have to videotape a lesson that would be reviewed, evaluated, and critique by the consultant, the building administrator, and their colleagues that they became physically and emotionally sick. Their emotional state led them to an agentic rejection of not only the suggestion of the videotape but also the implementation of AEA itself.

The teachers' sense of professional agency was shattered. All of a sudden, the co-researchers felt the oppression of an authoritative regime from both inside the school, in the form of the building administrator, and outside of the school, in the form of the consultant. The

women feared the authority figures and resented them. Feeling intruded upon, bullied, and harassed, all four women displayed agentic rejection by either complying with what they were told to do, or retreating into the shells of their classrooms, or verbally attacking those who spoke about the videotaping. Their beliefs about their professional status in the school, about the trust they had placed in authority and in their colleagues were shattered. They experienced mental and physical stress, anger, denial, and grief that their professional weaknesses had been exposed. For them, AEA ceased to have any meaning other than a situation to be managed and lived through. When the outside consultant left at the end of November, the co-researchers had to wait until the beginning of January for the critique and review of their performance.

### **Agentic Accommodation**

In the long month of December, after the videotapes had been made but before the critique and evaluation, the four teachers realized that the only recourse for survival was agentic assimilation. This agentic accommodation took two forms. The first was compliance in implementing some of the reforms. This was true for the two teachers who participated in the videotaping, and the two who didn't. The mood in the building had shifted to some mode of classroom compliance in the anticipation that more people would be in with clipboards and checklists. The second form of agentic accommodation was to the mood and disposition of colleagues from whom they took their cues on how to act. The staff was hostile and suspicious towards the reform, the building administrator, and the outside consultant. All four women felt it was better to not protest, to keep their heads down, and try to ride the wave of anger that was coursing through the schools.

The four co-researchers felt a deep relief when the outside consultant's visits ended in the middle of January. As suddenly as it had come to the forefront in November, AEA just as quickly left, not to be mentioned again until the following September.

The perception of the achievement of professional agency among the co-researchers ran along a spectrum. At one end were the memories of professional and personal excitement, achievement, and fulfillment in their early days as teachers. At this end of the spectrum the women felt acknowledged as educated, contributing, talented professionals who, realizing they had much to do and much to learn, willingly participated in every opportunity presented to them. In the middle, in the Acorn School District, the women felt confused and bewildered. Initially experiencing a sense of interest or even joy, the women grew to reconcile their impressions of agentic capacity to being complacent, happily left alone in their classrooms and navigating the normal day-to-day operations of their schools. At the other end of the spectrum, their perceptions of agentic capacity were nullified by feelings of alienation, disconnectedness, loneliness, and isolation from their administrators, colleagues, and themselves.

### **The Essence of the Phenomenon**

The essence of the four co-researchers perception of their achievement of individual professional agency as they participated in AEA was professional dignity. The stages of the perception of agentic achievement as teachers participated in AEA depended on their loss, maintenance, or growth of professional dignity as they interacted with administrators, outside consultants, and colleagues.

For Marion, dignity resided in the regard she felt people had of her years of teaching experience, being considered with appreciation and dignity by her administrator and the outside consultant. Her physical and emotional anguish at the thought of being manipulated and tricked

resulted in the loss of her professional dignity, and the loss of the regard she felt for her administrator. Under those circumstances, her perception of agency was diminished by feelings of anger and shame.

For Vicky, dignity arose from needing and getting approval from being acknowledged as a member of a professional team. She yearned for the respect of older, more experienced teachers all the way through the professional development experience. When forced to sit through an evaluation and critique of her teaching performance in front of the administrator, outside consultant, and her colleagues, it was her feeling of the loss of professional dignity before others that made her withdraw mentally, but she continued to seek approval by trying to put a positive interpretation of it.

Phyllis's sense of the achievement of professional agency was directly affected by the loss of professional dignity she experienced from the lack of consideration her colleagues displayed towards her. Lonely and isolated, she sought connection with the adults in her school but felt rebuffed and consequently unable to see herself as agentially in a positive way. Feeling that she needed to begin her 26-year career over again in her new school, her sense of professional agency was determined by feeling included in the school's social circle that was dominated by certain staff members.

Erica's sense of the achievement of agency came from her craving the esteem of her administrator. She wanted her administrator to dignify through acknowledgement her past experiences, her deep education, and her ideas. Erica's professional dignity, she felt, would rise with the opportunities given to her to improve her teaching performance. Although having outsiders come in to her classroom to observe felt like she was putting on a show, nevertheless

she enjoyed having the opportunity to speak to people, felt friendly towards them, and enjoyed talking to them as an equal.

For all four women, their sense of the achievement of professional agency, based on professional dignity, was intertwined closely with professional validation. They wanted to be acknowledged for their wisdom and experience, their intelligence and competency.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

This chapter contained the results of my phenomenological analysis that connected back to my two research questions. Through my analysis I determined that the essence of the phenomenon, as experienced by the four co-researchers, was professional respect. Although the findings revealed that the perception of the achievement of professional agency traversed an arc from agentic anticipation through agentic rejection, and finally negative agentic assimilation, my findings expanded these categories by identifying other stages of agentic achievement: agentic alienation, amnesia, guilt, and suppression.

In Chapter Five I draw on the concept of the chordal triad to examine whether the ecological framework of agency offers insights into the essence of the phenomenon of the perception of the achievement of individual agency among of the four co-researchers in the context of rural education.

### **Chapter Five: Discussion**

In this chapter I present a discussion of my research study. I make connections to the theoretical framework of teacher agency (Priestley et al., 2015), analyzing in depth the insights that an ecological framework of agency offered in understanding in the perception of achievement of agency (Biesta & Tedder, 2006; Biesta & Tedder, 2007; Emirbayer & Mische, 1998) among rural teachers. I discuss implications for practice for rural administrators and teachers, and offer suggestions for further research. I conclude the chapter with reflections and insights I have gained as a phenomenological researcher from this investigative study.

The purpose of my research was to explore how general educational rural elementary teachers perceived their achievement of agency within the context of a mandated pedagogical reform. In this study I focused on two research questions. The following section provides an overview of the findings and discusses each research question in light of the findings.

The findings for this research question are rooted in the essence of the experience of the phenomenon that in Chapter Four I characterized as the perception of professional dignity. In all four cases, co-researchers struggled to articulate the purpose of the reform, envision future actions based on the training, and its place in the day-to-day experiences of teaching in their particular schools. All four co-researchers were expected to enact AEA independently and without the necessary social and structural supports within their school communities that would have not only ensured AEA was implemented but would have helped the teachers achieve the perception of positive agency during its implementation. The importance of the social milieu is the defining factor in the teachers' perception of professional agency, highlighting its relational as well as temporal characteristics. The ecological framework of agency provides understanding



of the conditions that made the perception of agency possible or impossible within the context of the professional lives of the co-researchers.

### **The Ecological Theory of Agency**

The ecological theory of agency distinguishes three characteristics whereby an agent (or teacher) can achieve agency. First, agency is temporal. It is dependent on the interplay of the elements in past, future, and present temporalities – the “chordal triad” (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). Second, agency is emergent, something that can be achieved, not solely dependent on an individual’s personal dispositions, qualities, or traits, although these can enhance the achievement of agency (Buchanan, 2015; Eteläpelto et al., 2013; Priestley et al., 2015). Finally, agency depends social contexts, meaning that the quality of relationships within a particular context can either promote or inhibit the achievement of agency (Coburn & Russell, 2008; Coburn et al., 2010; Donnell & Gettinger, 2015). As Priestley et al. (2015) stated, “it is problematic to expect that teachers become agentic when in their practical contexts they are unable to do so” (p. 127). Not a fixed trait, therefore, agency can be enhanced, promoted, remain static, or subverted, by the conditions that surround the agents, or teachers.

A detailed examination of the three ecological factors necessary for the achievement of agency within the co-researchers’ educational contexts revealed three interwoven dominant themes that played critical roles in the framework of ecological agency within each school building. These themes were the nature of the AEA training and implementation, the roles of the building administrator and the outside consultant, and the relational networks between colleagues. All three themes were characterized by issues of power and control, and were critical to the co-researchers’ experience of the phenomenon: professional dignity. All were linked

within the chordal triad (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998) that is tied together the achievement of agency.

***Theme One: AEA Training and Implementation: The Iterational Dimension***

When speaking of past professional development experiences, those iterational experiences the co-researchers selected to help them make sense of the upcoming AEA training sessions, all four co-researchers expressed excitement and satisfaction. Those times were characterized by purpose. Teachers understood prior professional development experiences, saw that they connected to a professional need, and articulated the usefulness of these experiences in relation to their teaching situations and student needs. Teachers mentioned the ability of past school leadership teams to understand what teachers needed professionally, to cultivate not only a sense of urgency but also a feeling of support. In most cases, the experiences were sustained over the long term and became part of the culture of the school district and local school community. All four co-researchers felt that they had been chosen in some way by the administrative team and that their leadership abilities would be cultivated through the types of professional development offered and the notice taken of them as teacher-leaders. Even Vicky, with the least amount of prior professional development experiences, recalled her opportunities with a sense of possibility, as all four teachers seemed to recognize that what they were experiencing at the time would lay the foundation for good teaching and good pedagogy in the future. Above all, the co-researchers enjoyed the feeling of professional freedom to choose what was best for them and for their students. This sense of freedom and recognition amplified their experience of professional dignity and worth. These elements of iterational experiences - purpose, choice, camaraderie, leadership, and freedom - set the groundwork for the co-researchers' anticipation of learning about and implementing AEA.

As they participated in AEA training, all four co-researchers selectively reactivated past experiences that would help them make sense of the new initiative, manoeuvre through it, and set their expectations of how to use it in the future. They tried to ignore doubts and misgivings they had about the applicability of AEA to their current school environments, the overwhelming amount of material, and their confusion about how they could implement AEA when feeling overwhelmed by setting up for a new school year. For the co-researchers, including Erica who had significant prior experience in professional development experiences, the overriding perception of agency at the beginning of the training was generally positive, exploratory, and invigorating.

With the exception of Erica, who had experienced similar professional development training in the past and who felt bemused by the situation, the co-researchers began the AEA training with enthusiasm. Even Erica acknowledged that “any kind of training is a good reminder that it’s good teaching.” The co-researchers were impressed with the trainers who were upbeat and enthusiastic. After the first day, however the co-researchers began to experience disequilibrium. They found the training disorganized, confusing, and overwhelming. There was too much information. They began to feel intimidated and did not understand how what they were learning could be relevant to the actual students they would be teaching. As Vicky said, “I didn’t know how to apply it.” The timing of the trainings – at the end of June, right when the school year ended, or at the end of August, when teachers were already mentally juggling what needed to be done to set up classrooms for the new year – was also a problem. The teachers went through the AEA training, but after the initial exposure and practice, AEA was dropped so teachers could concentrate on district initiatives that were scored, that mattered: math and literacy.

Despite their confusion about the purpose of AEA, the co-researchers seemed to trust the decision of the district administrators to require all district staff to participate in the training. As Marion said, "I was excited that the district was doing this to get on board" with the rest of the state. The decision to be trained in AEA was seen initially by all co-researchers as a benefit for them and their students.

The feeling of being in this together, of everyone in the district uniting around a common goals, was concretized by the long-time bonds of family and friends who also worked within the district. Neighbors, family members, and friends, who also worked in the district, all participated in the same training. Although there were a few people who complained, Marion said that "people were excited." The sense of community the training fostered carried over beyond the walls of school buildings and into the external informal communities that operate within the district.

The darker side of the training was that the structural and cultural conditions of the district, where administrators made all the decisions, ensured that participating in the training was not questioned. Even for Erica, whose deep prior training and expertise led her to call the entire experience as a "time suck," teachers had no option but to attend and participate as they were told to do. They followed the routinized patterns of behavior they had always followed as either veterans of the district, or newcomers who had perhaps followed similar expectations in their previous districts. These patterns of behavior served two purposes. They reinforced and supported the notions of compliance, and they also put the locus of power and control within the hands of the district administrators. The co-researchers perceived their achievement of agency as participating in the training. Their doubts about its importance or relevance they seemed to

attribute to their own inadequacies of not understanding the material, feeling overwhelmed, or not having sufficient background.

***Theme Two: The Roles of the Building Administrator, the Outside Consultant, and the In-District Coach: The Projective Dimension***

If the co-researchers initially believed that their local educational landscapes would change to include AEA once the school year began, they saw immediately that AEA would form no part of the immediate goals of teaching and learning for the new school year. Although there were a few attempts to keep it going at first, as Vicky said, “The principal would prefer us to be knowledgeable, but we didn’t talk about it.” Teachers had followed orders to attend the training, but their reasonable expectations that they would need to use AEA were wrong. Teachers had been trained, materials had been ordered for classrooms, and people could now implement – or not – AEA. Although the co-researchers struggled to make sense of what they were supposed to do with AEA, very quickly it became easier to ignore it rather than try to use it purposefully. What they had initially agentically accepted- attend the training, hope for guidance in implementing it – quickly turned into denying it or ignoring it. On the rare occasions a district administrator would visit their classrooms, the teachers would hastily make sure evidence of AEA was visible in their classrooms: sentence frames, anchor charts, learning targets. Their perception of agency was based on compliance, on not “getting caught.” The co-researchers assumed superficial responsibility for compliance using AEA even though there was no effort on the part of the district administrators to maintain the training or to explain to the teachers exactly what purpose AEA served. It was in their relationship with the building administrator, and the later arrival of the outside consultant, that the co-researchers began to perceive the loss of professional dignity. As Erica said, “It would have been helpful if (the administrator) had set the

scene for me as a teacher. Let me help you understand the kids.” Teachers were expected to comply with implementing AEA, but without understanding why. With no sense of priority, or no sense of excitement, there was, as Vicky said, “no path forward for growth.” The co-researchers’ perception of achievement of agency stalled as other initiatives and demands took over their time. All co-researchers recalled that there was a lot of complaining amongst colleagues if the subject of AEA ever came up. The excuse always seemed to be that everyone was so stressed and overwhelmed that there wasn’t enough time to implement AEA. The building administrators seemed unwilling, unable, or disinterested in support AEA implementation or insisting on it except during scheduled compliance walkthroughs. All four co-researchers viewed their building administrators as weak, unable to effect change without placating certain teachers they saw as power brokers in the school. Vicky said that she “wanted to be gracious to the administration” but for all four co-researchers the building administrator’s lack of interest and support drew feelings of resentment and disappointment. The crumbling trust in the building administrators affected the goals the co-researchers tried to set, and also their daily work in classrooms.

**The In-District Coach.** The in-district coach had been a former classroom teacher who had been tasked by the district administrative team to provide ongoing professional development and support to the rest of the teachers in the school district. Working with individual teachers in classroom, she was able to draw on her knowledge of the district and its students to support Marion and Phyllis who welcomed her into their classrooms. For Erica, who had considerably more knowledge than the coach, and Vicky, who was so overwhelmed she didn’t recall at first that the coach even existed, the coach’s role was insignificant.

Thrust into her new position, and without status or support from administrators, the in-district coach could not negotiate her new status as coach for much of the rest of the elementary teaching staff. She resigned from the district after the second year of AEA implementation.

**Projective Aspirations.** As the four co-researchers began the school year, they drew upon their iterational experiences, including the recent AEA professional development, to form goals that would help them initiate action to implement the AEA reforms. Laying the foundation for successful implementation through positive iterational experiences, where administrative leadership was critical to successful implementation, did not occur. The co-researchers were unable to project future actions about implementing AEA because of the lack of administrative and collegial support. It was not that the teachers refused to implement the reform. They did not see how they could. There was no perception of agency because there were no options for teachers to aspire to it through agentic actions. The women found their time taken over by other priorities set by the building administrators who seemed to be in conflict with the superintendent. Their desire to be agentic was frustrated by the school cultures that seemed to be at cross-purposes with AEA. Their projective aspirations turned into avoidance of AEA.

Because their day-to-day work in classrooms was not formed by AEA, the co-researchers either forgot about it, or remembered it with guilt. In Phyllis's case, when she tried to tie AEA to her past training in equity, she was told not to. It wasn't until late fall that teachers were forced to implement AEA when the outside consultant arrived. AEA then became the locus of a power struggle between the administrators, the outside consultant, and a core group of teachers whose point of control was making an instructional videotape. The focus of the projective dimension was now set by two authority figures. In recalling their experiences and emotions at this point in time – early November of the school year - the teachers' perception of agency was not in how

they implemented AEA, but in their reactions to the authority figures. The teachers were subsumed by overwhelming and emotions of anger, frustration, and fear. In all four cases, the co-researchers perception of agency was overwhelmingly negative. Their dignity as professionals was threatened by the fear of being exposed as possibly poor teachers, as not being capable of implementing AEA, or being judged as insufficiently professional. For all four teachers, including Erica who had the most experience in teacher-leadership, the projective dimension of agency was now focused on the creation of the videotape. The four teachers discovered that they were being coerced by a building administrator they could no longer trust, and by an outside consultant they did not know or have a relationship with. The co-researchers were not exactly sure what function she served, and their impression was that the performativity measures, like walkthrough checklists and videotaping, were solely her idea. They imagined her role as overseeing the building administrator in some way to set a school-wide AEA goal.

***Performativity.*** AEA had not been discussed as part of the teacher evaluation process. With the arrival of the outside consultant, all of a sudden the building administrator, consultant, and colleagues were doing instructional walkthroughs with clipboards, pens, and checklists to see if AEA was being implemented in classrooms. As Erica said, it came down to a matter of checking items off of a checklist.

The videotaping drew the strongest reactions from three of the four co-researchers, with only Phyllis not fixating on it. Of all the elements of AEA, it was this one performativity element that had the greatest impact on the women's recollection of AEA and their perception of themselves as agentic professionals. With neither structure nor support to make risk-taking possible, the co-researchers reacted violently when remembering the videotaping. Without any options for action, the co-researchers reacted instead, either with or against the angry mutiny of



their fellow teachers. Marion had her “claws out.” Vicky, the least experienced teacher, acquiesced, trying to establish a pattern of what she hoped would be model behavior to set an example for others. Erica made the video because she thought she had no choice, not seeing refusal as an option if she wanted the administrator “to respect” her.

***Theme Three: Relational Networks Among Colleagues: The Practical-Evaluative Dimension***

The cataclysms caused by the seemingly arbitrary, unwelcome, and evaluative performativity structures intensified emotions among staff to such a degree that schisms developed among teachers. The recollection of the videotaping, part of the performativity structure, was the tipping point in the co-researchers' perception of agency.

AEA implementation was forgotten as hostilities exacerbated the latent power structures within the school, cementing the positions of those who had power or were perceived to have it. Name-calling, mocking and bullying colleagues, engaging in exclusionary behaviors, being, as Marion said, “pitted against each other,” created such high perceptions of unacceptable risk that the perception of agency in the practical-evaluative dimension came down to trying to survive a hostile and degrading environment. The co-researchers saw through the atmosphere of forced, contrived attempts at collegiality on the part of the administrators, where teachers sat after the videotape viewings to set AEA goals. In a small rural community, teachers who were also neighbors began to feel the dynamics shift to, as Marion said, “us versus them”: teachers versus the consultant and the administrator, but also teachers versus other teachers. As Vicky noted about AEA, “nothing positive came of it.” This could be seen in the reaction of many teachers to the presence of the in-district coach, a former classroom teacher with many years of service in the district, who now became one of the lightning rods for derision and dissent. The power brokers in the school, unable perhaps to express their anger towards the figures of authority,

abused her verbally. Negative discourse overtook the entire school. Agency among the co-researchers became a matter of quietly suffering, complying, or rebelling against authority either by leading or participating in a revolt. The anger was not directed towards AEA, but toward the arbitrary imposition of a potentially humiliating and professionally degrading experience that teachers, who had never before been videotaped, were now asked to participate in, and willingly. When recollecting the social dynamics that flooded the school, the co-researchers displayed their strongest emotions. They cried, said they felt sick, hung their heads, or expressed defiance. Their beliefs about themselves as teachers, about their colleagues, their administrators were shattered by these educational contexts. Unable to directly challenge the imposition of what they considered arbitrary and unjust policies, and unable to mediate their agentic roles within the implementation of AEA, the co-researchers engaged in what Osborne et al. (1997) described as conspiratorial mediation, undermining the reform by sabotaging the efforts to implement it in their different ways.

By the end of the first year of implementation, AEA was already irrelevant to the four co-researchers. Their iterative experiences with the reform prevented them from projecting how they might implement any in their practical-evaluative day-to-day work.

### **Conclusion of This Section**

The ecological framework of agency offers insights into how rural teachers perceived their achievement of professional agency before, during, and after they participated in mandatory AEA training. Cultural conditions, discursive conditions, and social conditions contributed to the ways in which the co-researchers perceived their ability to act agentially.

Although the depth and breadth of their previous professional development experiences differed, all four co-researchers used iterational experiences to shape their projective, anticipated

agentic actions as they foresaw and imagined the implementation of AEA in their schools. The frustration of not being encouraged to set AEA goals and not being supported in implementing AEA strategies led the teachers to facilitating a work-around to the implementation, only doing so when they felt compelled by anticipated walkthroughs. Upon the arrival of the outside consultant, and the perception that the building administrators were teaming with her against the staff, the co-researchers' attempts at agentic projectivity were denied by their colleagues and by themselves. The purpose of AEA – to improve teaching and learning outcomes for students – was forgotten in the mutinous struggle both school staffs participated in against a performativity culture that left them feeling frightened, anxious, and angry. Any sense of emergent agency was destroyed in a maelstrom of violent social and emotional reactions, where trust, collegiality, and camaraderie could not withstand the battle for power and control between the power brokers in the schools.

### **Implications for Practice**

In this next section I discuss implications for practice for rural district administrators and teachers. I then offer recommendations for further research and conclude with reflections and insights I've gained from my research.

I have sectioned implications for practice for rural administrators and teachers based on the traditional roles administrators and teachers have in school districts. District administrators, for example, traditionally oversee budgets. Teachers usually oversee the implementation of initiatives in classrooms. It is important to emphasize, however that to break traditional hierarchical silos of power (Bunderson et al., 2015; DeRue & Ashford, 2017) both administrators and teachers need to work in tandem to allow teachers opportunities to achieve professional agency.

### **The Complexity of the Rural School Setting**

As I discussed in Chapter Three, federal and state policies can discriminate unfairly against rural communities by imposing on rural districts the same performativity benchmarks as more affluent, urban and suburban districts (Arnold et al. 2005; Cloke, 2006; Schafft, 2016; Showalter et al., 2019) without providing the same access to monetary and material resources, qualified personnel, and professional development opportunities.

People living rural areas in the United States generally experience greater levels of poverty and unemployment than those who live in more developed areas (Mohatt et al., 2005; Schafft, 2016). Opportunities for changing employment, having access to greater health insurance, and childcare are more limited. As a result, those who have professional status in rural communities, like teachers, possess opportunities friends and family members in the same community may not have (Schafft, 2016; Schafft & Biddle, 2014). Rural teachers enjoy increased job security due to the difficulty in recruiting new teachers, a consistent salary that increases every year, the opportunity to belong to a union, having a pension, access to paid sick leave and vacation time, and good health benefits. These conditions promise rural teachers virtually guaranteed employment, but also bind them to the district. Rural teachers with deep roots in the community may not have the opportunity to travel outside of it to seek employment in other school districts, as family ties may necessitate staying in the local environment.

### **Implications for Rural Administrators**

In rural districts, building administrators play a critical role in the acceptance of and maintenance of teachers' achievement of agency (Preston & Barnes, 2017). Without purposeful input from teaching staff and other stakeholders in these three areas, however, initiatives that seek to increase teacher agentic capacity may fail. Working with teaching staff, rural district

administrators can help teachers achieve professional agency by setting a vision, capitalizing on rural teacher expertise, and purposefully working to develop a climate of belonging for staff.

To change a school's educational landscape – to allow the agentic achievement of rural teachers - there must be a clear mission of the purpose of the initiative, explicitly communicated by the administrative team, and clearly understood by teaching staff. This can be accomplished through distributed leadership, capitalizing on rural teachers' expertise, offering differentiated professional development, and deliberately cultivating community.

### ***Distributed Leadership***

In their conceptualization of hierarchical power systems, Bunderson et al. (2017) noted that hierarchical status and centralization have a negative impact on members of groups who perform complex tasks. Rural teachers may be willing to follow an initiative, at least initially, but if they misunderstand the administrator's goals and plans they cannot align their actions in such a way to allow them to make sense of the leader's decisions (Larsson & Nielsen, 2017).

Formalized distributed leadership is different from informal teacher leadership. Informal teacher leadership naturally occurs in any school setting, where certain people, due to their perceived social status in a school, will find ways to influence staff members (DeRue & Ashford, 2017). Members of organizations will internalize identities as either leaders or followers, with or without recognition or endorsement from organizational contexts (Epitropaki et al., 2017). Formalized distributed leadership indicates a willingness on the part of administrative teams to purposefully recognize, promote, and empower cadres of teachers (Fairman & MacKenzie, 2014) to work collaboratively with administrators to implement reforms, oversee curriculum decisions, and ensure the well-being of staff (Sales et al., 2016; Torres, 2019).

Distributed leadership models break hierarchical power silos to allow teacher leaders to emerge (DeRue & Ashford, 2017). Rural administrators who implement formalized distributed leadership (Adigüzelli, 2016; Bektaş et al., 2020; Sales et al., 2016) can draw on the skills, capacity, experience, and knowledge of teachers to help set the vision for what the district would like to be in tandem with the formally recognized administrative team.

Members of a distributed leadership team can help set the vision for the school district. These members provide the constructs and supports for staff to understand the vision and implement it, promoting teacher agency (Adigüzelli, 2016; Bektaş et al., 2020; Sales et al., 2016). As Priestley et al. (2015) noted, although teacher capacity is a necessary condition for agency, it is insufficient without strong structural supports. It would therefore be critical that attention is paid to how teacher leadership candidates are selected, and the kinds of supports available to them to be successful in their roles (Fairman & MacKenzie, 2014; Klar et al., 2019).

### ***Capitalizing on Rural Teacher Expertise***

Bringing in outside consultants who do not know the rural community cannot help teachers achieve agency if their expertise is rejected. Not to capitalize on the deep experience and knowledge of rural teachers is a missed opportunity to increase the sustainability of reforms and initiatives. Rural leadership teams can draw on rural teachers' rich backgrounds and experiences to offer professional development opportunities that target the needs of the community, promote teacher agentic identity, and can prove sustainable over time (Campbell et al., 2016). Teacher leaders within the district who have earned the trust and confidence of their peers (Jolliffe, 2014) are more likely to expediate change and promote agentic actions among their peers than outside consultants who are not known to the community. The cultivation and support of teacher leaders uses staff in systematic ways to create inclusivity for all members.

***Differentiated Professional Development***

The decision to compel all rural teaching staff to participate in the same kind of training can be problematic for those teachers who have insufficient background to understand it, little desire to learn it, or such extensive experience that the training is perceived as a waste of time. Instead of blanket professional development, rural administrative teams could look at the skills and dispositions of the teaching staff to build capacity from within (Hallam et al., 2015; Ketelaar et al., 2012; Lovin et al., 2012; Luttenberg et al., 2013). Individualized and small group training sessions can be developed based on the needs of staff members (Cherkowski & Schnellert, 2017) and the practical application and relevance to actual classroom settings and students (Akiba & Liang, 2014; Miquel & Duran, 2017). Distributed teacher leadership would play an important role in determining the types of differentiated professional development (Campbell et al., 2016) that would serve teachers at their point of need to increase agentic achievement.

***The Deliberate Cultivation of Community***

If members of an organization cannot make sense of an initiative, and do not feel that they possess some autonomous professional status where their opinions and voices are heard and respected, then performativity culture takes over. Negative emotions, such as fear, anger, resignation, boredom, or victimization rise. This sets up a clash between conditions that promote agency and those that promote accountability. Individuals who cannot make sense of the two competing cultures will construct plausible but inexact narratives to help them navigate the conditions in which they find themselves (Weick, 1995). Any relationship, inside or outside of schools, needs genuinely respectful, trusting, and supportive relationships to thrive and allow members to take risks (Freire & Fernandes, 2015; Taylor et al., 2019). If an initiative is setting

such a negative tone that trust and goodwill among colleagues, particularly in a small-school setting, are jeopardized, then teacher agency cannot be achieved.

### **Implications for Practice for Rural Teachers**

With little staff turnover and strong loyalty to the district, students, and families, rural teachers have a unique opportunity to achieve professional agency and by doing so shape teaching and learning to prepare students intellectually and emotionally for life both inside and outside of the community.

Teachers in rural districts tend to display loyalty to their profession, their status as teachers, their image of themselves as professionals, and to their colleagues (Burton & Johnson, 2010; Burton et al., 2013; Wenger et al., 2012). This concept of loyalty to the school community is a strength, but it can also hinder agentic achievement (Larsson & Nielson, 2017). Although rural teachers may feel that, individually, it might be too risky to address decisions made at the administrative level, collectively there are specific steps rural teachers could consider to promote their professional agency.

### ***School District Budgets***

Rural teachers may not understand the particular dynamics of some of the pressures administrators face. Rural school district budgets are such an example. Public school funding in the United States comes from federal, state, and local sources, but because nearly half of those funds come from local property taxes, the system generates large funding differences between wealthy and impoverished communities (Leachman et al., 2017). Such differences exist among states, among school districts within each state, and even among schools within specific districts (Leachman et al., 2017). Rural districts that depend on property taxes, for instance, will have their budgets impacted. Less money will potentially alter whether rural districts can offer



competitive salary scales to recruit and retain highly-qualified teachers. The rising cost of publicly-funded pensions, health care premiums, and maintaining and improving district infrastructures are other factors that have an impact on available district monies. In light of financial challenges, rural district administrators may feel they have no other choice but to accept outside funding sources to improve professional development opportunities for teachers.

### ***Envisioning Professional Development***

Researchers have identified many characteristics of successful professional development. Effective professional development is longitudinal (Kintz et al., 2015), practical (Nuthall, 2004), combines hands-on and theoretical approaches (Tomlinson & Moon, 2013), is focused on student achievement (Parsons et al, 2016), is connected to schools' communal goals and improvement plans (Macià & García, 2016), and promotes teacher leadership identity (Sinha & Hanuscin, 2017). If rural teachers feel their achievement of professional agency is not being met by district-imposed pedagogical mandates, they could become better informed about the different types of, and opportunities for professional development they need to help them achieve agency within their schools (Pei & Yang, 2019). By doing so they can present to district administrators alternative professional learning programs.

**Identifying External Community Supports.** Rural teachers have opportunities to increase their own professional agency by taking advantage of external community partnerships. One possibility is state education networking groups (Akiba & Liang, 2016; Miquel & Duran, 2017). These groups, made up of like-minded educators, serve as sounding boards, offer professional resources, notify members of conferences, and offer other peer supports that reduce isolation by increasing educators' skills, knowledge, and dispositions (Akiba & Liang, 2016; Levin & Schrum, 2017). State departments of education may offer free professional development

training courses, scholarships to conferences, or other supports designed to improve teaching and learning. Virtual professional development can be just as effective as what is offered in-person (Fishman et al., 2013). Rural districts may also offer tuition vouchers or other forms of partial scholarships for teachers. Teachers who can find ways to institutionalize themselves with outside peers can perhaps collectively problem-solve around issues particular to rural communities, and in doing so achieve professional agency (Reiser et al., 2017). Peer supports could improve practices for peer coaching, creating a coaching platform in schools (Levin & Schrum, 2017; Miquel & Duran, 2017; Reiser et al., 2017). Rural teachers could also ask district administrators to contact university faculty to consider partnering with them on professional development initiatives (Eargle, 2013; Holley, 2017; Maheady et al., 2017; Sterrett et al., 2020).

### ***Expecting a Seat at the Table***

In any organization, there is ascribed power, assumed power, or negotiated power. (Bunderson et al., 2015). In organizations where power is siloed, leadership is often framed in terms of hierarchy and positioning (DeRue & Ashford, 2017). Individuals who do not have ascribed power may seek opportunities to assume power or negotiate it, depending on circumstances (DeRue & Ashford, 2017).

School leadership is often framed in terms of hierarchy and ascribed power (Freire & Fernandes, 2015). Leadership will always be assumed by certain members of an organization (Fairman & Mackenzie, 2012). The critical question then becomes what type of leadership rural teachers want in their schools. When certain teachers assume or negotiate more power than other teachers, it can lead to power brokering among staff members, which has an impact on all teachers. Staff members voices and agentic achievement become part of a symbolic capital

struggle (Campbell et al., 2016). This kind of symbolic capital struggle can be detrimental to school climate and culture.

The loyalty of the teaching staff to the district, reinforced by professional employment status and strong ties of friendship and kin between teachers and the outside community, offers rural teachers the opportunity to expect a seat at the administrative table when decisions are being made that will have an impact on the school community (Freire & Fernandes, 2015). Rural teachers can ask to work in partnership with the administrative team, either at the school or district level. Rural teachers can play significant leadership roles within their schools and districts by asking for ascribed power as teacher leaders.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

My phenomenological study, as is true for all phenomenological research, has uncovered one set of interpretations and meanings to explain how four teachers within a rural school district experienced the perception of achieving agency. Consistent with what Moustakas (1994) said about phenomenological research, further analyses would reveal more layers of meaning, more distillation of structures, and more revelations of the essences behind the co-researchers' essence of their perception of agentic achievement. What this means is that, as rural communities are complex, the issue of rural teach agency is also complex and cannot be summarized or characterized by one research study or set of experiences. More research, particularly in mainstream academic journals, is needed to examine the issues rural educators face as they implement state and federal reforms, balance budgets, attempt to recruit and retain highly-qualified staff, as they search to meet the needs of their students through building the achievement of agency among their teachers.

More research is also needed to understand the conditions within rural districts that help or hinder the development of teacher agency. Such research would also examine how the long-term experiences of veteran rural teachers with solid roots in the community, and the experience of new teachers to the rural community could complement each other to develop agency among teachers. Research is also needed to understand the relationship between rural district administrative teams, teachers, and community members who have succeeded in breaking top-down information flow to empower teachers. Of potential interest would be a study of the relationship between rural administrators and their assumptions about teaching staff, especially in terms of loyalty and acquiescence.

### **Conclusion**

Using the concept of the chordal triad and the ecological theory of agency, this phenomenological study sought to understand the essence of how four rural elementary teachers perceived their possibilities for agentic achievement in the light of a top-down pedagogical mandate. In this study I noted the lack of contemporary rural research and I emphasized not only the strength of rural school communities but also the many opportunities rural school district administrators have to draw on those strengths to empower rural teaching staff. Above all, I discovered that the perception of the loss of professional dignity among certain rural denied them the opportunity to not just grow in their agentic purpose, but to enjoy and thrive as educators. Highly qualified teachers, in particular in isolated, rural areas, are a resource that cannot be squandered. Giving rural teachers the chance to fully develop their agentic capacity will help ensure only a fully-dedicated staff, but an engaged one entirely committed to teaching and serving the communities in which they live and work.

There is a saying, that if you want to find out about the road ahead, then ask about it from those coming back. As I and my co-researchers make our way back from my phenomenological journey, it is my hope that my study will empower other rural teachers to achieve their agency as they walk their professional journey with courage and purpose.

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**APPENDIX A**

**INITIAL INTERVIEW: FOCUSED LIFE HISTORY**

**Initial Interview: Focused Life History (adapted from Seidman, 2019, p. 21)**

1. I'd like to ask you about your past life, up until the time you became a teacher.
2. Could you please reconstruct your early experiences in your family? In school? With friends? In your neighborhood? At work?
3. Which past experiences in school stand out to you? Why?
4. Did you participate in any situations outside of school, such as camp counseling, tutoring, or coaching before becoming a teacher?
5. What has been your philosophy over rough spots in your life? How have you coped with stress or with unexpected change?
6. What are your hopes, dreams, and plans for the future? Are there any ways you'd like your life to change?
7. From a professional viewpoint, what direction would you like to see your life go in in the future? What would you like to be doing 10 years from now?

**APPENDIX B**

**FOCUSED PHENOMENOLOGICAL INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

**Focused Phenomenological Interview Questions (Adapted from Moustakas, 1994, p. 116)**

1. Please describe your experience AEA..
2. What dimensions, incidents, and people connected with the experience stand out to you?  
Why?
3. In what ways did the experience affect you (personally, professionally)? What (personal, professional) changes do you associate with the experience?
4. Please describe your feelings about the experience (before, during, after).
5. As you were engaging in the experience, what thoughts stood out to you?
6. Do you recall any bodily changes or physical states associated with the experience?
7. Is there anything else associated with the experience that you consider significant that you'd like to share today?

**APPENDIX C**

**Member Check Reflection Questions**

**Member Check Reflection Questions**

1. Please describe your reaction to the word cloud document.
2. Does the document reflect the nature of our two interviews? How? Why not?
3. Were you surprised at the words that came up the most frequently? Why? Why Not?
4. Are there any words or ideas that are missing from the document?
5. Is there anything you'd like to add to the word cloud, or any other information you'd like to share with me today?



**APPENDIX D**

**INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL**

**Institutional Review Board Approval**

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GEORGE FOX UNIVERSITY HSRC INITIAL REVIEW QUESTIONNAIRE

Page 19

Title: EXPLORING RURAL TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE ACHIEVEMENT  
OF PROFESSIONAL AGENCY IN THE CONTEXT OF A SCHOOL DISTRICT  
MANDATED PEDAGOGICAL REFORM

Principal Researcher(s): Janice Scudder

Date application completed: October 26, 2020

(The researcher needs to complete the above information on this page)

**COMMITTEE FINDING:**

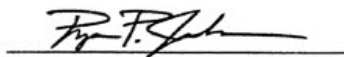
For Committee Use Only

☒ (1) The proposed research makes adequate provision for safeguarding the health and dignity of the subjects and is therefore approved.

☐ (2) Due to the assessment of risk being questionable or being subject to change, the research must be periodically reviewed by the HSRC on a \_\_\_\_\_ basis throughout the course of the research or until otherwise notified. This requires resubmission of this form, with updated information, for each periodic review.

☐ (3) The proposed research evidences some unnecessary risk to participants and therefore must be revised to remedy the following specific area(s) on non-compliance:

☐ (4) The proposed research contains serious and potentially damaging risks to subjects and is therefore not approved.



Chair or designated member

10-26-20

Date

**APPENDIX E**

**LETTER OF CONSENT**

## Letter of Consent

### RESEARCH SUBJECT INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Prospective Participant: Read this consent form carefully and ask as many questions as you like before you decide whether you want to participate in this research study. You are free to ask questions at any time before, during, or after your participation in this research.

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Dear \_\_\_\_\_

Thank you for your interest in my dissertation research on the experience of rural elementary teachers as they participated in the professional development program *Academic English Acquisition*.

I am a doctoral student at George Fox University, and I will conduct this research as part of my dissertation requirements. Dr. Karen Buchanan, my dissertation chair, will supervise my study, which George Fox University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) has approved. Your participation will entail three interviews lasting between 30-45 minutes each.

The results of my research will be published in my dissertation. Direct quotes from your interview may be used to clarify research conclusions. By signing this consent form, you give me permission to use statements you make during the interview.

By volunteering to be interviewed, you may develop greater insight about the experience of the lived experiences of teachers in a rural school district and contribute to knowledge about the lived experiences of rural teachers. No risks are anticipated with your participation in this study.

You can stop the interview at any time. You may also withdraw during their study either during or after your participation without negative consequences. Should you withdraw, your data will be eliminated from the study and immediately destroyed.

The information you provide will be kept strictly confidential. The informed consent form will be kept separate from the interview data. The interview data will be labeled with a number code, and your name and other identifying information will be changed in the write-up of the research results to protect your identity. Recordings will be destroyed 12 months after the completion of all interviews. No other members of the school community, including school staff, administrators, the superintendent, or school board will be interviewed, and will not review the data. I will obscure geographic and other identifying details, as well as use composite stories to guarantee participant anonymity.

If you have any questions about this study or your involvement, please ask me before signing this form. If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant, contact George Fox University's IRB by email at [cjaquith@georgefox.edu](mailto:cjaquith@georgefox.edu). In order to ensure the ethical

conduct of George Fox University's researchers, the IRB retains the right to access the signed informed consent forms and study documents.

Two copies of this informed consent form have been provided to you. Please sign both forms, indicating that you have read, understood, and agree to participate in this research. Return one to me, and keep the other for your files.

*I have read and understand this consent form, and I volunteer to participate in this research study. I understand that I will receive a copy of this form. I voluntarily choose to participate, but I understand that my consent does not take away any legal rights in the case of negligence or other legal fault of anyone who is involved in this study. I further understand that nothing in this consent form is intended to replace any applicable Federal, state, or local laws.*

Name of participant (please print) \_\_\_\_\_

Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Name of researcher \_\_\_\_\_

Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Contact Information

Name and email address of researcher:	Name and address of supervisor:
Janice Scudder <a href="mailto:jscudder06@georgefox.edu">jscudder06@georgefox.edu</a>	Dr. Karen Buchanan George Fox University 414 N. Meridian St. Newberg OR 97132 <a href="mailto:kbuchana@georgefox.edu">kbuchana@georgefox.edu</a> (503) 554-2884