

“I Bet I Could Do That”: Perceptions of Preservice Teachers in a Rural Grow Your Own (GYO) Teacher Education Program

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School districts across the United States (U.S.) are experiencing persistent teacher shortages. These are especially acute in rural areas, where it is difficult to recruit and retain teachers, especially certified teachers for diverse learners with differentiated needs. Grow Your Own (GYO) programs, where school districts provide support for current students to become teachers, continue to gain popularity in hard-to-staff rural areas. This qualitative case study examined one rural school district's GYO teacher education program through the lens of program participants at the university stage of a six-year GYO commitment. The participants described three critical tensions: their sense of place between home and school, their desire to serve the rural community conflicting with their desire to explore new opportunities, and their sense of responsibility to others in tension with their own self-interests. In analysis of these findings, we offer guidance toward more student-centered GYO programs in teacher education, with particular attention to student recruitment, program structure, and student well-being.

Keywords: teacher recruitment, teacher education, grow your own, rural cultural wealth, spatial justice

Teacher shortages are an ongoing, nationwide problem that limit educational opportunities and outcomes for students, particularly in rural areas (Oyen & Schweinle, 2021). To fill open teaching positions, school districts are developing innovative, homegrown teacher recruitment programs such as scholarship programs and sign-on bonuses to incentivize teachers to join the classroom (Latterman & Steffes, 2017; Nguyen et al., 2022). One area of promise in addressing the rural teacher shortage is the growing movement to establish “Grow Your Own” (GYO) teacher education programs. GYO programs are most simplistically described as pre-college teacher pipeline programs, where middle or high school students are selected or invited to gain field experience, mentorship, and direct instruction prior to entering a college-level teacher education program, with the intention that the participants will return to the school district to teach at “home” after the degree is conferred (Gist, 2022; Rogers-Ard et al., 2019). As many GYO programs offer scholarships or stipend pay in exchange for participation, these programs not only seek to recruit but

retain teachers in the long run. A key determinant of GYO programs is the ability to draw “new, frequently first-generation, underrepresented minority group candidates into the teaching profession,” and therefore the program requirements are commonly developed based on district needs to teach and serve diverse learners (Valenzuela, 2017, p. 4).

In this study, we spent significant time with a small group of participants in one GYO program in Leon County (pseudonym), a rural county with a large school district, which we describe more in detail later in this article. As part of the GYO program requirements, the students represented in this study were asked to leave their rural home – the place they began the GYO program as high school sophomores – to obtain their teaching degrees, which would be partially funded at any in-state institution. In this transition, they found themselves temporarily uprooted and yet still responsible for the development and maintenance of personal relationships turned professional within their rural town. The purpose of this qualitative case study was to better understand the experiences of these GYO participants during the college years of the program, with an aim to inform future GYO program development in a student-centered way. We examined students’ perceptions of the program to answer: (1) How do first-year university students from a rural community in the southeastern United States navigate a grow your own (GYO) teacher education program? and (2) What role does diversity play in how students negotiate their participation in the GYO program?

Homegrown Solutions to a National Problem

Extant literature describes unique challenges that rural schools face in recruiting qualified teachers, including limited professional and social development opportunities for young adults in smaller towns and lower compensation (Calderón et al., 2011; Coady, 2020, 2021; Hartman et al., 2017; Monk, 2007). Since teacher preparation curricula are commonly geospatially-blind, preservice teachers do not learn about critical differences in education policy or practice in rural areas. Failure to address these differences leads to diminished understanding and awareness of rural education strategies, leaving future teachers detached from the realities of rural schools and results in challenges to retention efforts even if recruitment is successful (Green & Letts, 2007).

With these challenges in mind, we consider rural teacher education and recruitment to be issues of spatial justice and educational equity. We problematize rurality as a construct that has been understudied (Thier et al., 2021) and ill-defined, often positioned in a false binary (urban-rural) that threatens resources and investment for rural communities (Eppey, 2015; John & Ford, 2017). For us, rurality encompasses more than physical or geographic space; it reflects a sociocultural network of human relationships to space and land that motivates or demotivates action, emotion, and behavior. Rurality therefore encompasses a community cultural wealth of knowledges, practices, and relationships, and these socioecological assets can be utilized to solve local problems like teacher shortages (Crumb et al., 2023). For example, Hammer et al. (2005) found that GYO programs in rural areas succeeded because, when compared to teachers from other teacher preparation pathways, GYO participants were more likely to want to teach in a rural

community and stay in their teaching position once hired because they felt socially rooted in the community (Reininger, 2012; Schwartzbeck et al., 2003).

Place as an Essential Lens

Students who begin a GYO program as rural high school students and then relocate for college in an urban space undergo significant social and cultural transitions that are grounded in *place*. The financial cost of college for rural, low-income students is a considerable barrier to participation in formal teacher education programs and is also a barrier to in-community rural teacher recruitment (Espinoza et al., 2018). One cost mitigation tool is the development of GYO partnerships between K–12 schools and universities. These partnerships can infuse understanding and funding solutions into these school-university relationships, which can in turn become critical for rural teacher recruitment and preparation due to the high cost of traditional, four-year teacher education programs (Texas Comprehensive Center, 2018). However, GYO programs are typically *contractual*, meaning that students may receive a college scholarship for participation but are expected to work a certain number of years in the rural area upon graduation from the teacher preparation program (Carl & Seelig, 2023). Student participation in a GYO program therefore represents an early investment in a specific career pathway, potentially shaping students' college and career decisions before they have fully explored alternative educational or occupational possibilities (Blazar et al., 2026).

While research on GYO programs has gained traction in recent years as a response to challenges to teacher recruitment nationwide, it is critical to understand the historical motivations behind GYO programs (Oyen & Schweinle, 2021). GYO models date back to at least the 1970s, where educational inequity in K-12 schools motivated community organizers to seek ways to connect culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) communities and the traditionally middle-class, predominantly White teacher workforce (Coffey et al., 2019; Valenzuela, 2017). In the past fifty years, the need to recruit more racially and ethnically diverse teachers has increased, especially as rural communities have experienced pronounced in-migration of primarily immigrant Latine families and diverse youth (Azano et al., 2025; Johnson & Lichter, 2022; Petrin et al., 2014). According to a 2022 report from the U.S. Government Accountability Office, 80% of the K-12 teacher workforce was White in the 2017-2018 school year, highlighting the demographic mismatch between the teacher workforce and the increasingly diverse U.S. student population. In addition to the need for more diverse representation in the teacher workforce, there are well-documented benefits to recruiting diverse teachers, especially in rural areas where students are less likely to encounter non-White teachers (Monk, 2007). Lichtenberger and colleagues (2015) found that new teachers tend to apply to work in schools with high proportions of students from similar demographic backgrounds as themselves.

However, societal perceptions of the qualities that teachers “should” possess and exhibit place limitations on who gains access to the profession and why, resulting in structural inequities embedded into teacher education programs and student entry into them (Burton & Johnson, 2010; Darling-Hammond & Berry, 2006; Hardré, 2008; Will, 2023).

GYO programs offer a promising solution for hard-to-staff rural districts, as the teacher candidates are already accustomed to a rural lifestyle and have community ties. As a recursive investment, school districts that target local high school students provide professional and economic incentive for local youth while securing a promising future workforce (Gist et al., 2019). Harris and colleagues (2010) found that principals looked for teachers who understood the types of students that they served, who were committed to staying in their communities, and who connected with the culture of the school. In that regard, rural community members hold the insider knowledge needed to adeptly navigate local school policies and politics and use that knowledge to educate youth in the community. The juxtaposition of school administrators seeking teachers who understand the students they teach while minoritized teachers struggle to see themselves reflected in many rural students underlines a key disparity in recruiting diverse teachers to predominantly White rural towns and is a primary rationale for this study.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in two theories that challenge stereotypes about rural people, schools, and places by centering community strengths and local resources. These theories have implications for teacher education. *Place matters* in education, both in terms of the structure of how schools are funded and work, as well as who participates in schools and who decides which voices and histories are told (John & Ford, 2017; Schafft, 2016; Tieken, 2014). In critical place-based pedagogy, Gruenewald (2003) describes how rurality intersects with Freirean critical pedagogy, emphasizing that “places themselves have something to say” (Freire, 1970, p. 624). Critical pedagogy of place illuminates how the cultural, economic, social, and political context of a place shapes the people who inhabit it; and people, in turn, shape the place they inhabit. This theory also captures how power and influence are systematized in rural communities and how, despite persistent under-resourcing, rural areas function by building upon existing strengths and knowledges within the community.

In the context of teacher education, place and rurality have not been consistently treated as essential equity issues, even in a state like North Carolina, where more than 75% of the school districts are considered rural following local classification codes from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020; Public Schools First North Carolina, 2025). For instance, in their review of rural teacher education, Reagan et al. (2019) synthesized 59 articles that spanned the decade between 2007 and 2017. They noted two themes across the literature: how place matters in rural teacher education, and operationalizing place for teacher education programs. With respect to the former, when place is not considered specifically in teacher education, educators are under-prepared

to meet the needs of students; however, simply having exposure to rural communities is insufficient to prepare educators for rural schools. In the second theme, the scholars noted that coursework could begin to address rural school challenges and strengths but was not enough to meet the needs of diverse subpopulations such as English learners. Recent research (Coady et al., 2023; Golombek et al., 2022) suggests that field experiences and direct connections with rural underserved students and families can mitigate these oversights in teacher education when place and equity are centered in teacher education programs.

Gruenewald's (2003) critical pedagogy of place and Crumb et al.'s (2023) work on rural cultural wealth provide a theoretical foundation where the process of rural students becoming teachers for the purpose of serving their communities can be interpreted as acts of liberation and revolution. The rural cultural wealth framework, built upon Yosso's (2005) conceptualization of community cultural wealth, has four dimensions: rural resourcefulness, rural ingenuity, rural community unity, and rural familism (Crumb et al., 2023). *Rural resourcefulness* refers to the way that people in rural communities take actionable steps to alleviate constraints that limit their ability to succeed or live well. *Rural ingenuity* remarks on how rural inhabitants transform shared community knowledge into creative responses to challenges to overcome difficulties. In both familial capital and rural familism, people feel an innate sense of belonging within a sociocultural context built on interpersonal relationships, primarily within kinship networks but occasionally with extended family, which Crumb et al. (2023) include as "extended kin" (p. 6). Kin networks are instrumental for *collective care*, where family networks in rural communities are created and used to care for others, which serves as "protection against oppression and adversity" by providing people with emotional, social, financial, and navigational support (Campos et al., 2014; Crumb et al., 2023, p. 6; McCulloh, 2022).

Rather than using a deficit-based approach to rural place, our combination of these theories reinforces the strength, resiliency, and agency that rural students can develop as a form of resistance to the systemic inequities they face. To capitalize on rural cultural wealth in educational contexts requires recognition of what school–university–community collaborations and interpersonal relationships can provide to students, especially in the college and career planning stages. We acknowledge that students who become *community returners* – people who reject outmigration – can be, and are, significant community and educational assets (McHenry-Sorber et al., 2023).

Methodology

In this study, we used qualitative research methods with three focal participants to capture how these students navigated the GYO program and how rurality, relationships, and diversity played out in their perceptions of the program. To answer the research questions, a variety of data were collected from individual interviews, a focus group, and archival data that included photo elicitation with images provided by the participants. Other material data were obtained from program archives including program

descriptions, websites, and teaching portfolios that the participants created in the program. We used qualitative research analytic techniques, which we describe in detail below.

Researcher Positionalities

We undertook this study as part of a graduate-level seminar on rural education at a public, four-year institution. As a small group of scholars from diverse racial, linguistic, and socioeconomic backgrounds, we had varying experiences of rurality, either growing up in rural communities or living in one at the time of the study (some experienced both). Several of us studied language and multilingualism, and others studied educational policies for leaders and transitions from high school into higher education. Our diverse identities as marginalized women, many from rural backgrounds now rooted within an urban research university, informed how we framed the study in equity and community cultural wealth and further framed our analysis and interpretation of data (Yip, 2024). Although we did not sample for multilingual learners, the linguistic strengths of several team members illuminated the findings on linguistic diversity among the two multilingual GYO participants. Thus, we acknowledge that our diverse backgrounds framed the study and informed the findings.

Study Site

The rural GYO program in which our participants took part was located about an hour drive outside of a metropolitan area in the southeast United States. To drive into the county seat through the downtown area showcased new and old one- and two-story brick buildings: a Chinese restaurant, a plumbing company with a “Thank you Jesus” sign in the window, and a deteriorating movie theater with a marquee and an American flag waving above. Surrounding the downtown were impeccably restored historic homes and a gothic revival Episcopal church, all of which were at least 200 years old, many listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Approximately 50,000 people resided in Leon County at the time of the study. Leon County’s main commodities include agricultural products, poultry, and manufactured goods. According to state level data, across the county, approximately 5,000 K-12 students were served, and about 75% of the schools were considered “low-performing” by state and federal standards.

Like many other counties across the state, Leon County was experiencing a teacher shortage. For the five years prior to this study, the school district had a 20% year-over-year teacher attrition rate, and district officials were desperate to find a solution. In addition to a 7% salary supplement as well as sign-on and retention bonuses to recruit and retain teachers beginning in 2016, to encourage outstanding high school students with an interest in teaching to enter the profession, the county established a GYO teacher program. Funding for the program changed after the 2020 murder of George Floyd. Local businesses approached the community and school district to identify solutions to the racial tensions faced nationally and locally. The district responded that the teacher shortage was taking a toll on school functioning and the

district and local businesses entered into a financial agreement to fund the university costs for students in the GYO program.

Recruited during their sophomore year of high school, students were encouraged to join the GYO program through school-wide announcements and emails from district administrators, personal invitations from high school teachers, and previous participant testimonials. The application process was rigorous, with several rounds of interviews designed to interrogate a student's commitment to succeeding in the GYO environment and later pursue a teaching career.

Once the students completed three high school years, which included a teacher education curriculum and a minimum of 200 hours of local internship experiences in classrooms across all grade levels, they could choose to apply to any in-state university teacher education program. Once accepted into a program, students received a substantial scholarship, which was funded by local Leon County businesses and was renewable annually for three years. The expectation was that for each year that the students utilized the scholarship, they would "repay" Leon County in a year of teaching service in the classroom. The GYO program was heralded across the state in local news outlets as a successful model to build a teacher pipeline for rural school districts.

Participant Sampling

The reputation of Leon County's GYO program, which featured prominently in local educational news sources, led to this study. Following a cold email to inquire about the program, we conducted two initial meetings via Zoom with the director to ensure that potential participants in the program would qualify for our study. We used convenience sampling to recruit students who participated in Leon County's GYO program that were then enrolled in a university undergraduate teacher education program, as we were most interested in gaining understanding about the experiences of students who had left the rural town to attend school in an urban setting. We received Institutional Review Board approval to recruit three to five participants to triangulate interview, observation, and archival data. Three participants who met our criteria elected to participate.

Data Sources

We used multiple sources to obtain detailed data to understand the inner workings of the GYO program, as well as data that captured the participants' experiences and perceptions of it. Primary source data included three in-person data collection sessions. These sessions consisted of two individual, semi-structured interviews with each student and one focus group with all three students. The focus group was conducted between the two individual interviews at a local restaurant of the participants' choice. Students were asked to bring photographs of their rural community to the focus group, and we elicited stories from those.

Secondary source data consisted of two meetings in Leon County at the high school with the director and the lead teacher of the program. These data were used to inform questions for the three focal

participants. In Leon County, we captured images of the rural community, identifying locations and representations of the community and the GYO program itself that were mentioned by the focal participants during interviews. We also gathered archival data about the rural GYO program to learn about the structure, features, and history of the program. To reiterate, our sampling and recruitment were based on Leon County's reputation as a model GYO program and convenience sampling among university students, over 18 years of age, who had participated in the rural GYO program and were completing their university teacher education. As a team of scholars, we kept individual field notes and de-briefed after each interview to share our own emerging ideas. These practices supported as a research team and helped us identify and discuss emerging interpretations grounded in place. We ensured clarity in the data, that is, we ensured that transcriptions were accurate and available for team members, to build trustworthiness across the data sources.

Data Analysis

We used open and axial coding techniques to analyze the corpus of data (Saldaña, 2016). All the data, including images, interviews, focus group, and archival data, were uploaded into ATLAS.ti. We used the collaboration feature to share changes in coding in real time. As a team, we worked collectively through the first participant interviews to ensure that we had a similar understanding of the process of inductive coding and the essence of the data. We took small chunks of data, examined, and interpreted the data with respect to the theoretical framework, namely rural cultural wealth and critical pedagogy of place. Our first round of coding consisted of exactly 100 codes that emerged around place, rural ingenuity, and community return. Some sample open codes included: adaptable, belonging, community care, financial concerns, resilience, and resource scarcity. We collapsed the codes into categories before merging those into themes. Examples of collapsed codes included rural resilience, transitional spaces, relationships and care. For each round of data analysis and coding, we met as a team to ensure we shared similar understandings of the codes.

We then worked in pairs to code each interview, focus group, or material artifact. After the data were coded, we met again and reviewed the codes that were generated from the data, collapsing codes into categories that were semantically similar and removed extraneous codes that were duplicates. We identified areas in the data that needed further clarification and generated a final interview protocol, informing the final individual interview with each participant. We triangulated the data from the various data sources: images we took in the community and those brought by participants to the focus group meeting; interviews; focus group; and archival data regarding the Leon County GYO program. Triangulation aimed to ensure trustworthiness in the study and to ensure that we accurately captured participants' experiences, stories, and realities.

Participants

The three participants in our study included three first-year university students who entered the teacher education program with advanced standing based on college credits earned through the GYO. Even though we met them in their first or second semester at the university, the credits they brought with them placed them academically at the third- or fourth-year level. Below we describe the participants' backgrounds and experiences in the GYO program. All names are pseudonyms.

Domingo

Domingo was the youngest of two boys born to Mexican immigrant parents. He was proud of his heritage and the foundation his parents built that modeled hard work and achieving success in whatever he chose to pursue. Due to his mother's encouragement, Domingo, who attended English only schools, could speak and write in both Spanish and English. A self-proclaimed science enthusiast, Domingo once dreamed of becoming a marine biologist. From an early age, Domingo advocated for his education by seeking out the best possible middle and high schools available in Leon County. Domingo exuded a spirit of fun, perseverance, and resourcefulness. He shared dreams about returning to Mexico, where his family roots were from, and teaching there. His first experience with teaching was in a bilingual (English-Spanish) dual language immersion program where he assisted in a first-grade classroom.

Martina

Martina was the youngest of five siblings in her family. Martina's parents immigrated to Leon County from Mexico more than twenty years ago. She attended Leon County elementary school, and, as she got older, discovered that she could attend a Spanish dual language immersion middle school within the county. As her educational journey flourished with the support of culturally relevant opportunities, which she did. Martina's family encouraged her to focus on her education. She knew she would attend college from a very early age. Martina described Leon County as a "quiet community of fields and close neighbors with a growing Hispanic population." Martina spoke of the people from Leon County with affection, stating that "people from [Leon] County have a lot to offer. There is a lot of potential. We are a part of something to be proud of."

Margaret

Margaret was a witty, 22-year-old white woman from a small, incorporated town in Leon County. As a child, she spent her days working alongside her siblings on the family poultry farm. Margaret's family ties to the land reached back hundreds of years and were a source of palpable pride and deep connection to the community. She spoke of the rural spaces around her as 'home' and maintained a fondness for the people who made the community unique. The history of Leon County was important to Margaret, and she believed that sharing the stories of the people and land were an essential part of rural education, as student and teacher.

Findings

Findings from the study demonstrate students' perceptions of the program, their commitment, challenges they encountered in the GYO program, and how they navigated various geographic (rural and urban) spaces when attending university. The first theme related to the **rural diversity and the sociocultural context** that influenced students' decision to become rural teachers. This both supported and contributed to tensions for the students as they went through the program. The second finding illuminated how **rural community, care and kinship** and perceptions of teaching – their chosen career path – shaped their experiences in the GYO program. The third finding related to **rural resilience and resourcefulness** in relation to the students' rural identity and their ability to navigate physical, social, and emotional spaces. Each is described below.

Rural Diversity and the Sociocultural Context

The first finding related to the social and cultural context of becoming rural teachers and how participants' cultural and linguistic diversity shaped those decisions within the complex context of rurality. We found that the students enacted a *solution lens*, that is, they viewed the GYO program as a way that they could address social and political inequities related to education for themselves and their community. For the two participants who were Latinx and bilingual Spanish-English speakers, this involved a sense of 'representation' as future Latinx teachers for the rapidly growing number of Latinx students in the county. All three participants recognized the sociopolitical context that shaped the GYO program itself, namely the murder of George Floyd in 2020 and the underfunding of rural schools, which was dependent upon legislators who defunded public education in favor of "school choice" vouchers.

Participants identified and prioritized what they saw as their role in the larger organization toward change to support the school district. For example, Martina commented that teacher education programs and the education field in general was primarily composed of White women. When asked why she joined the GYO program and what she thought teachers in the rural county should teach, Martina lamented that she was motivated by hope for change, in the way rural education was societally perceived as non-diverse:

It was easy to feel like I wasn't, I guess, represented in the curriculum. Or you just kind of got used to it without realizing that you got used to it. So, using student backgrounds in the classroom, and acknowledging them [culturally and linguistically diverse students], can be a good experience. I feel like in the teacher education program, it is kind of difficult to teach that, it is hard to talk about it, because as we know, the education class is mostly White females. So, it's kind of hard to like, bring that up. And as much as they [peers] try to empathize with it, it can be difficult. (Martina, Interview 1)

While Martina emphasized the importance of including diverse student backgrounds in the classroom, she simultaneously expressed feeling stifled in a teacher education program where she was one of very few ethnically diverse preservice teachers. Martina was not the only participant who conveyed this view. The tension between the participants' ethnicities and the education field was palpable in the

interviews. The Latino participants' backgrounds significantly shaped how they viewed themselves as future rural teachers. They discussed the lack of diversity within the school district and their sense of personal responsibility to broaden racial and ethnic heterogeneity in schools. However, because of the lack of diversity in their university teacher education program, coupled with their invisibility as diverse students in the rural district, they generally failed to see their language and culture as resources. Martina described her preservice field experience and linguistic diversity as a *threat*:

I wasn't able to [use Spanish] as often as I could, because it [her placement] was like once a week... they [English learners] were kind of grouped together in back of the classroom, and they weren't really engaged because they didn't really understand, like how quickly they [practicing teachers] were speaking science vocabulary in English... so I was able to work with them off in the corner, like off to the side while they were working. I was kind of translating and helping them while they were doing the worksheets. It makes me think about my classroom... if I have an English language learner in my classroom. I could teach them in Spanish, because I feel obligated, like I should provide them resources and all this other stuff in Spanish and essentially teach them, like, two different classes. (Martina, Interview 2)

Rural Community, Care, and Kinship

The second finding underscored participants' interpersonal relationships within their kin networks (that is, immediate family) and school staff, which influenced their college and career choice, and supported mental and emotional health during the high school-to-college transition. Students noted that the encouragement from within these relationships was indispensable, particularly because their parents and peers perceived teaching as a low-income and low-status profession. That conflicted with their self-perception as high-achieving students with STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) interests, which were traditionally associated with high-paying careers. Simultaneously, those same relationships created tensions in their path to becoming a teacher. For example, Margaret discussed the low-status perception her father held about educators:

I have fought tooth and nail the entire way to get where I am. My father hates teachers, principals, board members. He had a very negative experience and that shaped his whole perception. Not one person is at fault. In his mind, teachers aren't shit. And it's always like this double standard, because I was expected to excel in school, but also I was told that education didn't mean anything. (Margaret, Interview 1)

Like Margaret, the other two students described a feeling of tension related to their participation in GYO program. Martina explained that the expectation of returning to the rural county after college added pressure, as she thought about how her relationship with her parents would change and where she might live in order to maintain her independence but still support them. Domingo detailed added stress he felt from within his kin network. As a bilingual student from an immigrant Latino family, he translated for his parents, set up bank accounts, and paid the household bills. Recognizing the responsibility that he had, he

felt compelled as a future teacher to remove that responsibility and pressure from other bilingual children from immigrant households. He shared,

I want people to not feel like they have to grow up a little too soon. I think a kid's purpose is to go to school, have a good education, a quality education, and, um, try to lessen outside factors. I guess that ultimately stresses a child out, because it's a lot, like, if you put that on a kid, that's a lot. (Domingo, Interview 1)

Data from the study revealed that kin networks were complex and nuanced, offering both support *and* stress for students. This was particularly poignant for the Latino students whose families had expectations about their return to the community to help the family. Despite the tensions about education as a career path, all three students expressed some level of responsibility and loyalty to family and their rural community.

Family was not the only strong influence on participants' decision-making. All three participants narrated how teacher-to-student relationships were nurtured within the school environment as they obtained direction for academic work, participating in the GYO program, and applying to universities. The students specifically mentioned the extraordinary personal support from the GYO program lead teacher, Ms. Williams (pseudonym), not only while they were students in the program but as students at the university. Every Sunday, Ms. Williams sent all her past and present GYO students a personal text, praising them for their resilience and reminding them of her support. As Margaret proclaimed, "I would sing the praises of Ms. Williams to the heavens." Martina shared those same sentiments. She noted:

I think Mr. Lucas [the director of the rural high school GYO program] and Ms. Williams definitely spent a lot of time on us and giving us information on us because they do want to see us succeed. It's just like why they make us apply for so many different colleges, because they want us to know that we have, like, options to do something after. (Martina, Focus Group)

Domingo described feeling some pressure from the GYO program administrator to remain enrolled, portraying the communication as a source of deep personal and emotional conflict. He stated, "They're putting you on this pedestal at such an early age...I kind of felt trapped because I had to live up to someone's standard." While he acknowledged the financial and social benefits of the GYO program, and the social change he thought he could make as a teacher, he felt conflicted about his participation:

A lot of people ask me, would you do it again. I would say no. Just because... Yes, I have a [Associate's] degree now. Yes, I have college experience. Yes, I have this teacher field experience, but it wasn't easy getting all that. It was a lot of stress on me. It was a lot of focusing that I had to do, to try and maintain good grades. I like the experiences that I had, but, um, I don't know, I just feel like I missed out on a lot, and I'm still graduating the same year I would have graduated if I didn't take that route. (Domingo, Interview 2)

Ultimately, the participants navigated between these social perceptions and competing tensions – family and educator relationships and their views about becoming rural teachers in a perceived low-status

profession. Parents' doubts were counterbalanced by the relationships the participants had with the GYO educators. This contributed to the participants' sense of resilience, and program retention.

Rural Resilience and Resourcefulness

The final theme involved the resilience and resourcefulness that the participants invoked. The participants felt that their rural community cultivated traits of determination, confidence, and self-reliance within themselves and their peers. Rural resilience was demonstrated in three ways in this study: rural community support as hope, belief in the rural community as having potential to thrive, and the ability to flexibly navigate (code switch) between the rural and urban setting.

Resilience appeared as somewhat of a survival mechanism, as the students navigated the GYO program in an under-resourced rural community, applied to and attended university in an urban area, and learned to 'figure out' how these social systems worked. To demonstrate resilience and community, Margaret shared a photo of her brother standing next to his tractor in a ditch (Figure 1). She described the story of how the tractor broke down in the ditch and "community came together to help us." She continued that the community "didn't go 'haha, you drove your tractor into a ditch,'" but rather came together to find a solution, because getting stuck in a ditch could happen to anyone there. In her words, "it's like the community came together to help rather than to shame."

Figure 1

Margaret's Brother Standing Next to his Tractor in a Ditch (Focus Group)



The stories participants shared about community care came to life in the landscape and small towns. Field notes documented a new local coffee shop that served as a safe haven for students to meet when school projects were due, empty storefronts and businesses that seemed to have been once thriving,

and, overall, a community that was struggling to keep businesses alive and attract newcomers. To the participants, these were markers of rural resilience, rather than struggle. To illustrate, when describing their community, the students highlighted the differences between their rural community and the neighboring affluent town. Domingo stated,

What splits [the county] is actually a railroad track... it felt a little forgotten. People, my friends who I went to church with, who went to school on the other side of the tracks, had better experiences than we did, and it's not even like it's a fifteen-minute difference from one county to another. (Domingo, Interview 1)

Nevertheless, despite the understanding that their community was at an economic disadvantage, participants continued to view the community by its strengths. Their school, rated a "low-performing school" by the state, was an asset to them and their community, and they felt they could be an asset to it in return.

Being from such a close community also affected how participants saw themselves as they navigated between their rural home, urban university, and the constant transition between the two. Participants described feeling included at home but lonely in the city. Martina especially expressed relief in going home every weekend to decompress where she no longer felt the need to "be professional." Domingo echoed this, saying:

If I'm going to be completely honest, the transition to college has been shocking to me... So, I'm not really involved in anything on campus right now. I've been trying to focus on the transition from, like, community college classes to actual, like, university classes, and it's a drastic change. There was this one [undergraduate student organization] group... but I don't know, I just... I guess I felt a little too overwhelmed with what I had on my plate, that I just never went. (Domingo, Interview 1)

As participants expressed what it might feel like to leave their newfound freedom to return to Leon County after three or more years of university study, they also described how they would feel leaving the urban spaces they occupied for multiple years and reacquainting themselves with life in their rural community. Martina commented that low teacher pay was a dilemma. She continued, "I can go somewhere else, get more money, do the same thing and probably be less stressed out because I have everything I need." Margaret also felt conflicted about returning to Leon County after college, noting:

Without this scholarship? I don't know if I would be looking at that county to teach in. And I'm not saying that because I dislike my county. You know, like, it has served me well. It's gotten me to where I am today.

The financial assistance that the students received by participating in the GYO program provided access to higher education and professional career pathways that they might not have had otherwise. At the same time, it also complicated the students' emotional ties to the high school with a sense of obligation and even fear of legal retribution if they did not return to Leon County to teach.

Despite their doubts, ultimately, the participants had positive attitudes toward the future and their work as teachers, which spoke to the rural resilience that shaped their motivations and decisions. They described how obstacles that prevented them from reaching a goal were only temporary, and they felt that

they could always find solutions to problems. Martina summarized how she could achieve what she set out to do stating, “I said, I bet I could do that... and so then I did” (Martina, Interview 2).

Discussion

The data from this study indicate the strengths of rural communities to foster a sense of belonging and care through a rural teacher education GYO program. However, like the literature illuminated by Reagan et al. (2019), some of the more nuanced and detailed areas of teacher education – in this case the linguistic multilingual strengths that two of the three participants held – were not centered in the teacher education program, either at Leon County or the university. Thus, rural, cultural, and linguistic strengths were left unacknowledged and remained invisible in these teacher education programs.

At the intersection of community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) and rural cultural wealth (Crumb et al., 2023), this study found that three adult participants in a rural GYO teacher education program demonstrated ingenuity and resourcefulness, leading to rural resilience. Their rural resilience consisted of strategies that they invoked to respond to limited resources and tensions that arose in their lives, and forward-thinking attitudes of hope for their rural community. In the context of rural resourcefulness, the three participants described how the GYO program itself was a resource for them to access higher education. Despite not having had experience in urban or university settings, their personal resourcefulness and relationships with community members were used to confront sociocultural adversities that they faced. They committed to becoming *trailblazers for change* in the community.

The participants in this study recognized that as rural teachers, they would work in under-resourced schools, earn low wages, and run the risk of being socially siloed, such as being the sole voice of representation for other Latino students. Language diversity in their community was not a resource for student learning (Ruiz, 1984). However, they were committed to disrupting that deficit ideology for their future linguistically-diverse students. Thus, linguistic capital (Yosso, 2005) manifested in different ways for these rural students. Martina and Domingo used their cultural and linguistic knowledge to assist their families in the rural community where few or no bilingual resources were available. What emerged from the data was the responsibility that the two bilingual participants felt toward their rural community and their commitment to build representation of Latinos as teachers and in professional careers.

The three participants spoke passionately about their relationships with their family members, who resided in the rural community, and, despite differences in perceptions on teaching, were a source of stability for the students. Knowing that they would return to their home county provided a sense of grounding and an image for the future. Yet as noted above, rural relationships and kin networks for these three went beyond the family; they maintained strong relationships with the director of the GYO program and the lead teacher, who provided emotional support while in university. This was a source *collective care*. As an extension of Yosso (2005) and Crumb et al.’s (2023) work on kin relationships, the GYO program administrator and the lead teacher provided social and emotional support to the students as preservice

teachers, so much so that these relationships became “like family,” or *fictive kin* (Nelson, 2020, p. 47). This significant finding is important for future research on GYO programs in rural spaces. The fictive kinship uncovered in this study appeared to buffer tensions around student choices when pressure from familial kin ran high, and as such, the students made choices based on advice from the GYO program staff, trusting that the staff were acting in their best interest regarding their college and career choices. Future research should explore potential interest convergence within programs that require (emotionally, financially, or legally intimidate) diverse students to return to an area with limited career and financial opportunity. Even as these relationships became influential to students, they also created emotional spaces where students felt guilt and shame at the potential of not following through on their long-term commitment to the GYO program and rural community that invested in their success.

Conclusion

This study examined the perceptions of rural students participating in a high school GYO teacher education program. The program was designed as a response to persistent teacher turnover and limited resources in a rural agricultural community in the southeast U.S. Using qualitative research methods, the study found that the three focal participants’ commitment to the program and return to their rural community was centered on their relationships with family and kin-like relationships with rural educators. The participants noted their desire to challenge educational practices that were structurally unequal, especially for rural schools and students, while striving to uplift the rural community, its strengths, and the under-represented people in it.

How these students enact a critical pedagogy of place that identifies and dismantles inequitable power structures within their specific community and re-constructs those in more humanizing and equitable ways is yet to be seen. Until then, these future teachers represent a pedagogy of hope, where culturally and linguistically sustaining practices could be practiced and normalized in rural schools (Paris & Alim, 2017). The students’ rural upbringing and community made a difference in the lives and experiences of these future educators – it shaped their identities, interpersonal relationships, goals and choices, motivation, and the development of the resilience they needed to navigate across rural and urban settings and imagine their communities and future rural schools as opportunities for social change. As one former GYO participant noted: “We are just the beginning of what is possible.”

This study holds implications for PK-12 education and GYO teacher education programs. First, the linguistic, racial, and cultural diversity of the participants were not centered in the participants’ K12 education nor their university experiences. Diverse rural students bring strengths, resilience, and resources that, when left unacknowledged, undermine students’ sense of belonging and the unique contributions that they can make to education as teachers. This is the case even though the community held asset-based perspectives of rurality and their community. In other words, an asset-based perspective of rurality can continue to overlook other assets inherent in the community.

Secondly, research on rural teacher education with diverse students remains seriously understudied (Azano et al., 2025; Thier et al., 2021). Given ongoing calls to reduce federal funding for social programs and educational research, the need to remain connected to rural communities through personal and professional relationships is more urgent (Knott, 2025). Otherwise, rural communities may become more isolated and less understood.

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