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CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES & OPPORTUNITIES IN RURAL EDUCATION

Invited Guest Editors

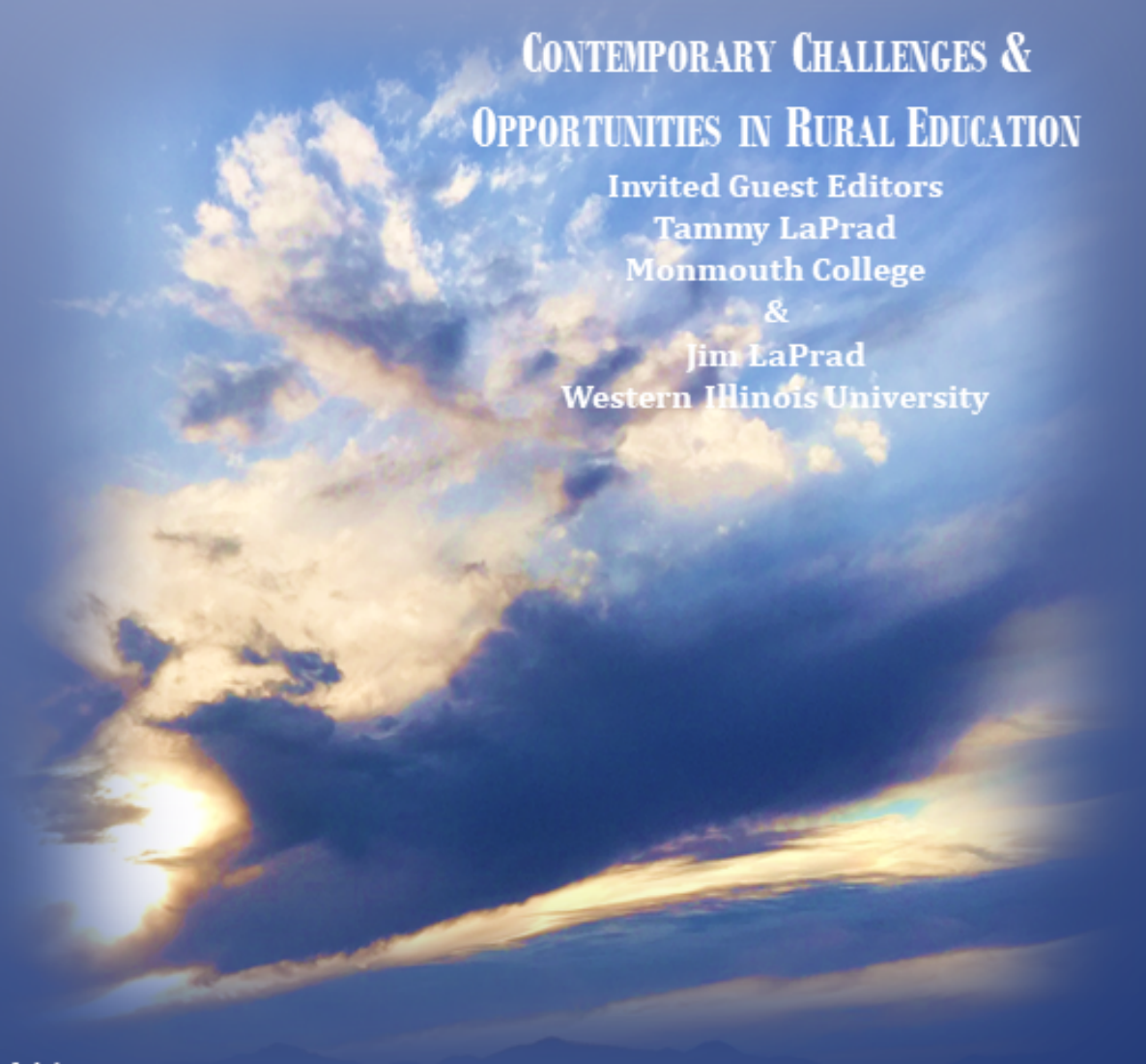
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Contemporary Challenges & Opportunities In Rural Education

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Voices & Perspectives from Rural Spaces: An Introduction to this Special Edition of *Thresholds in Education*

Tammy LaPrad & Jim LaPrad

Abstract

We begin our introduction by locating ourselves as rural educators connecting back to our rural childhoods, then to our rural K-12 teaching experiences, and finally our higher education positions in rural spaces. Next we invite Peter Greene and Mike Rose into our discussion acknowledging that while all rural spaces are unique, they all bear the promise of public education that is often full of political tensions and contradictions. Deborah Meier and Carol Lee remind us that all our schools must be instruments for civic engagement and learning forming the democratic fibers of our society. This framing 'opens the gates' for our authors to share their stories and research findings that illuminate rural challenges and concerns, contexts and perspectives, opportunities and promise.

Keywords: *challenges, democracy, promise, rural education*

As educators since our mid-twenties, we have both been lucky to have numerous experiences in both K-12 and higher education. Jim's first job out of college was as a USMC Infantry Officer, which is a unique form of education that has in many ways informed his ideas regarding teaching and learning. Both together and before we met, we've lived in rural spaces from Ionia Michigan and Kellner Wisconsin as children to Spotsylvania Virginia where we taught elementary and middle school in both Spotsylvania and Orange Counties. In 2003, we moved with our young family to rural Illinois and have been teaching and working with educators and educational leaders in many rural spaces across west-central Illinois. Many if not all teachers we have encountered not only put their students first but also know they serve the needs of their communities by teaching. Many of the teachers that have long careers in rural schools also have a deep understanding and love of their rural communities. These rural schools and communities, like so many others, are unique, diverse, and complex, and thus part of the web of our still young and fragile democracy.

As we were invited to construct this special edition call for *Thresholds in Education*, we have both been reading and reflecting on the essays in *Public Education: Defending a Cornerstone of American Democracy* edited by David Berliner and Carl Hermanns. Some of these essays helped shape the context of this call. Peter Greene, a life-long rural educator, echoes what many of us already believe, in his recent essay titled *Our Schools and our Towns Belong to Each Other*, that is

a promise of public education in the United States: that every single child will be given the chance to get as much help, as much training, as much knowledge as they can to help them

build a life. They will be given time, resources, and expert support to figure out how to become more fully themselves, to understand what it means to be fully human in the world.¹

He follows this by acknowledging that we have not always fulfilled this promise. Many of us recognize that there are competing interests and biases that hinder this promise, we also recognize the need for teachers and educational leaders to disrupt and correct the injustices that continue to affect rural public schools. We can easily assume that there is not a rural space that is exempt from teachers and education leaders in positions that while the goal is to serve all kids, also hold the tension between the political and ethical challenges within their own contexts.

Mike Rose in his essay, “Reflections on the Public School and the Social Fabric,” acknowledges that in the United States, while schooling is a foundational element of our society’s structure there exists these tensions and challenges as,

there is an urban—rural divide, involving economic, cultural, and geographic differences. Deeply embedded in this conflict is pride of place, and emotional attachment to landscape in people...there is an important reminder that even in the most easily definable regions, the bluest of blue states, the reddest of red, there is complexity—that here in the heart of coal country, there are the conflicting political opinions, not infrequently held within the same person. Local schools exist within this regional social and political ecology.²

Rose reminds that many individual struggles are also broader community struggles and we all share the opportunity and responsibility to examine individual conflict as well as the social implications. As an educator who has always taken on the opportunity to champion democratic practices Deborah Meier advises us on how we can address injustice, tension and issues in education.

She reminds us “schooling for democracy guides children to discover and develop their individual passions and strengths while also enhancing their sense of belonging and responsibility to a greater society,”³ this is no more true than in our rural schools and in our rural communities. Debbie concludes,

despite all, I still stand with my words written over 20 years ago and the conclusion of the *Power of Their Ideas*: “no matter how bad things seem today or what bad news may come tomorrow, what makes me hopeful is our infinite capacity for inventing the future, imagining things otherwise.”⁴

The reality, as Meier states, is that there are and will continue to be issues and problems but that there is hope. Hope often sustains action when issues can collectively be named and addressed.

1. Peter Greene, “Our Schools and our Towns Belong to Each Other” in *Public Education: Defending a Cornerstone of American Democracy*, eds. David Berliner and Carl Hermanns (New York: Teachers College Press, 2022), 62.

2. Mike Rose, “Reflections on the Public School and the Social Fabric” in *Public Education: Defending a Cornerstone of American Democracy*, eds. David Berliner and Carl Hermanns (New York: Teachers College Press, 2022), 53.

3. Debrah Meier and Emily Gasoi, *These schools belong to you and me: Why we can't afford to abandon our public schools*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 2017), 169.

4. Meier and Gasoi, 167.

What are they and how will rural schools and communities find the capacity for inventing or reinventing their future? Getting specific, Carol Lee points out that complexity of problems our communities, nation and planet face as per curriculum challenges and unruly school board meetings to the public health concerns of a global pandemic to the facets of climate change and in the ever-changing economic woes of rural spaces. She returns to schooling and education reminding us, “The question before us: what role can public education play in preparing young people, each new generation, to interrogate these persistent conundrums into engaging in civic reasons and civic discourse, informed by the commitment to democratic values.”⁵

Thinking about these values and the rural spaces we have lived and taught in from West-Central Illinois, to Spotsylvania and Orange Virginia, or our childhood memories of Ionia, Michigan and Kellner Township, Wisconsin, these spaces are all different, yet an element that is in common is that they all have schools that can be ‘home places’ for the students and for their communities. These places all have stories that need to be shared and learned from because they are the fabric of our society and when we lose even one story or community, there is a tear that if left unmended leaves a gap and subsequently a less than whole community. We are honored to help share the stories and this special edition of *Thresholds in Education*.

Overview

This special issue’s articles elaborate on the theme: contemporary challenges and opportunities in rural education. Authors were free to engage the theme discretely or simultaneously. As a whole the calls response resoundingly answers why contemporary challenges and opportunities in rural education matter. There is a long history of considering rural spaces as lacking. Rural spaces are unique unto themselves and thus can support the changes and innovations that are necessary for their sustainability. When rural places are resourced and supported, they can find ways to flex and adapt to all kinds of hardship by using assets to foster innovation and create positive narratives of community viability and sustainability. A number of the articles explore issues that rural communities face both historically and currently, yet in different nuances. Some narratives highlight growing concerns that are being encountered that shed new light on what it means to be from and a part of a rural place. Other articles introduce program and pedagogical approaches to be restudied that build on rural and small community assets and successes. These efforts on local and regional levels are leveraged to engage rural communities and improve rural educational institutions and students’ lives. In the end, this special issue is organized into three sections, rural challenges and concerns, rural context and perspectives, and rural opportunities and promise.

To begin the challenges and concerns, Jakubowski’s *Contemporary Challenges of Teaching Social Studies in Rural Settings* examines some oppositions social studies teachers face as they are subjected to ideological conflicts in the community and school settings in rural areas. Following, in *Depictions of Rural and Appalachian Culture(s)*, DeHart writes of Appalachian life and culture, where a number of problematic views persist, as do a number of counternarratives in various media through literacy practices, especially comics linked to the region. Next, Rockwood and Rouse’s study *The Costs of COVID* explores the disproportional impact the COVID-19 pandemic had on two rural neighboring Midwestern states with very different directives during the 2020-

5. Carol D. Lee, “The Role of Public Schools in the Preparation of Young People to Engage in Civic Reasoning and Discourse” in *Public Education: Defending a Cornerstone of American Democracy*, eds. David Berliner and Carl Hermanns (New York: Teachers College Press, 2022), 167.

2021 school year. Finally, Chikkatur's *Being in "Their House"* probes the impact on the adult facilitator in her case study of a Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) team in a rural Midwest high school as it speaks to the potential mutual impact in the community.

The second section, context and perspectives, opens with Fields-Smith and Baker's article *Centering the Lived Experiences* that examines the Black homeschooling movement, a phenomenon that has been largely ignored in the literature and disrupts the idea that homeschooling is a white and urban/suburban only phenomenon. Rivera's *Challenges and Opportunities for STEM Teachers* then explores the teaching experiences of two early-career math teachers working in rural schools and their decisions to teach there and leverage authentic change while suspending assumptions about what is best for rural students. Pattison-Meek's *Teaching for Understanding of Social Diversity* highlights the impact a high school Civics teacher can have on citizenship in his rural community threatened by urbanization. Lastly, Rogers, Rogers, and Miller's *Raising Rural Voices* addresses the challenges and opportunities in rural Alabama schools from the perspectives of teachers, as well as, the impacts of policy and community partnerships.

Our final third section offers opportunities and promise beginning with Arce-Trigatti, Haynes, and Kelley's *Rooted in Appalachia* counters common deficit views of Appalachian people with an alternative lens focused on place-based pedagogies and funds of knowledge. Baronak and Baronak's *Honoring the Power of Place* explores the layers of challenges facing rural spaces ranging from diminishing childcare options, teacher recruitment, and mounting teacher shortages, yet apprenticeship programs and place-based approaches hold promise. Additionally, Watson, McBride, and Singh's *The Everyday Work* explores the role community college STEM faculty play for their students and communities as they describe the rich characteristics of the space and the unique challenges and opportunities found there. While closing out this special issue, Goss's *Culture Shifts* article asks what would it take to make rural school irresistible to students? Their answers explore the impact one school district's innovative directional system had on staff culture and students' experiences in school.

As the editors of this special issue we are honored to present these articles to our wider audience as rural spaces are filled with challenges and concerns, context and perspectives, and opportunities and promise; all that is rural.

Contemporary Challenges of Teaching Social Studies in Rural Settings: Local & National Dissonance in the Classroom

Casey Thomas Jakubowski

Abstract

This case study examines the political and social pressures high school social studies teachers face in rural areas. In the political sphere, many social studies teachers focus on the end of course exam. The resources that informed this study were public materials on the web. Findings indicate teachers stay to state tested content.

Keywords: rural, social studies, political pressures

This paper examines contemporary challenges faced by social studies teachers who are subject to ideological conflicts in the community and school settings. Since the 2016 election of Donald J. Trump, there has been attention paid to rural communities in politics, sociology, and economics. Considering this turn, rural education is still significantly underrepresented in the research (Their, et al, 2021). As a former social studies teacher who practiced in rural areas, a member of a State Education Department’s social studies curriculum office, and an education faculty member in a rural situated school, my lived experiences (Azano, et al, 2021) in addition to my research agenda, have merged into the question of what, exactly are rural social studies teachers teaching? With the deep concentration of reactionary conservatives in rural areas, and significant racist outward signs, which include flags of the Northern Army of the Tennessee (Confederate Battle Flag), *Lets Go Brandon*, and the recent tragic rural origins of the alleged perpetrator of the mass shootings racially motivated in Buffalo New York, and the continued banning of “Critical Race Theory” and any diversity related works in conservative, Republican dominated states, this paper seeks to explore the intersection of teacher preparation programs, and in service social studies teachers are doing to implement the evolving New York State expectations for social studies.

Examining the work of Grant, Swan, Lee (2017); Gradwell (2010), and others, I posit that the teachers who are implementing the state standards and frameworks are trying to implement teaching for survival, or self-preservation by avoiding controversy and local community objection to their choices by presenting a “Whig” history that is bland and focused on end of course examinations, not social justice or citizenship preparation. The teachers, in rural areas, are often young, untenured, and afraid of losing their positions due to the potential backlash by community members who do not hold similar values as the teachers for social justice, diversity, and Culturally Responsive Education. The rural educators in the districts under investigation are concerned that if they go beyond the conservative, unspoken boundaries in areas of predominantly white students and families, their careers will be essentially over (Frankenburg, et al, 2019).

Using a case study (Stake, 1995) approach, and Krippendorf’s (2014) Content Analysis, I examine the syllabus, and publicly available material resources, textbooks, and websites assigned

by professors and teachers across the State of New York. I found that the higher education faculty and in service teachers hew extremely closely to the state issued guidance on social studies guides in grades 7-12. Most of the lessons, I found, are clearly designed to prepare students for the end of course examinations, but do not actually teach students to grapple with the social justice and change calls that the National Council for the Social Studies have issued to instructors. With the continued anti diversity narratives in public and private space in many small, nonurban areas, as well as the unknown political leanings of the social studies teachers, we may have a “fox in the hen house” moment in rural social studies implementation.

New York is not an urban state. Areas north of interstate 84, which bisects Orange, Dutchess and Putnam counties in the lower-mid Hudson Valley region, are rural. In fact, 40% of school districts in New York State are considered rural by the NCES (2014). Of the nearly 300 plus rural districts in New York State, most grades 7-12 are taught by one, or two social studies teachers. Each of those school districts are required by State regulations (Commissioner’s Regulations Part 100) to implement the Social Studies framework, enacted in 2014 to align with the Common Core State Learning Standards. The end of course exams, called the Regent’s examinations, are required for students to successfully challenge in grades 10 and 11 for graduation. Further, a teacher’s evaluation score is tied to how well students perform on the exam (Annual Professional Performance Review). School and District status in the *Every Student Succeeds Act* is tied to graduation, and with two social studies exams required towards graduation expectations, the teachers within those schools are subject to immense pressures. This paper seeks to examine how teachers in rural areas are negotiating the tensions of teaching to the test, and negotiating the balancing act of implementing state standards and frameworks in social studies while visual representations of racism and reactionary beliefs are readily displayed by individuals in the community.

The paper presents a case study of how two teachers in small rural districts teach social studies (Stake, 1995). The paper seeks to understand what the professionals are doing, in their enacted practice in order to achieve the least controversial pathway to prepare their students for the end of Semester Regents Exam. Through review of instructional artifacts, which were analyzed using Gee’s (2014) Discourse Analysis, for selected units during the year-long 11th grade US History and Government course, the paper found that teachers were adhering to the State frameworks and not delving deeper into enduring issues as recommended in the National Council for the Social Studies C3 frameworks, or the C3 Teachers Inquiry Design Model practices (Swan, Grant, Lee, 2013).

Literature Review

Social studies was born out of the Committee of Ten work in the late 1800s, The debate over what should be taught, when, and by whom created during the Progressive Movement post 1890. As Saxe (1991) points out, the early social studies curriculum focused on history in schools, especially K-12. Now, in 2022-2023, with overlapping issues in civics, economics, sociology, and geography, the National Council for the Social Studies, and the creation of the C 3 (College, Career, and Civics Life) at the national level have tried to influence the state level curriculum/ standards authorities to try and, frankly, include the social studies as a mandated part of K-12. With the No Child Left Behind (2001) focus on the literature, math and science areas, and the National Common Core State Standards, place literacy as the focus for all social studies content. In a difficult reality, New York State recommended the Gettysburg Address (Lincoln, 1863) be read as part

of a “close reading” CCSS Literacy exercise, without *context*. As the Stanford History Education Group, the C3 teachers, and other organizations, founded out of research by Wineburg (2018) and Swan, et al (2021) have produced a number of heuristics for students of history K- PhD levels to learn how to be an historian. One of the most significant parts of becoming an historian is to ensure the documents, artifacts, and resources are read in context.

Levstik, Barton, Monte-Sano, Reisman, Gradwell, and many others have developed research on how to teach social studies better, and with greater impact. Yet the major issue with teaching social studies evolves into two significant concerns. First, there is a strong correlation between difficulties teaching students the skills of history in elementary classrooms and the confusion with teaching literacy skills. These two different areas are interrelated, yet very different. Second, in many schools, social studies may be taught from textbooks, if the subject is taught at all. These two issues create a robust problem as children are often forgetful in both the literacy and the content presented in K-8 grades, and do not have accurate schemas for the works in the secondary (7-12 program). Another concern launched by practitioners is the wide range of tested content at the secondary levels, especially in states with a graduation or capstone exam requirement. Often curriculum decisions are made at the state level heavily influenced by political reasons. These politically influenced curriculum changes have made a number of impactful, detrimental, narratives which intentionally exclude groups who are under-represented, or subjected to real, and now, historically excluded violence. In mostly conservative controlled states, the teaching of history has become a career jeopardizing act. A conflation between Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Culturally Responsive Education Practices became a political ploy of candidates to demand schools teach a more “whig” or “white majority” history. CRT is a legal, graduate school level examination of how structural discrimination has directly impacted the wealth, health, and social status of under-represented peoples (Ladson-Billings, 2011). Critics of CRT are demanding that all K-12 curriculum, instruction, and supporting materials pass a review, and are submitted to parents and outside review changes. The CRT debate has merged with the “Parental Rights” movement that privileges parents directly impacting educational decisions made by schools at a micro level well beyond what previous practices have established as Board-Administration-teacher-parent relationships. These ongoing critiques and frankly, local rebellions to the duly elected, and delegated authorities local education given power by state authorities through law or constitution (Fischel, 2009).

The last concern of the literature over the past 25 years has been the methodologies of teaching social studies in classrooms becoming more diverse. Teachers are seeking to ensure that with growing socioeconomic, language, and cultural diversity, the pedagogy and classroom engagement programs are dealing with students who see reading and writing as “older, less relevant skills” and that map skills are no longer necessary with the development of handheld navigation systems and virtual maps. One of the complaints levied against the New York State Social Studies Civics framework was the theory based nature, with students creating a written policy paper instead of a more civics based, action oriented curriculum (Hinkley & Jakubowski, 2019). With the Jan 6, 2022 insurrection, and the “post-truth” American world, what are social studies teachers, especially in conservative parts of the United States doing in their classroom?

Method

The research study has grown out of earlier research into implementation of the adopted New York State Framework for social studies in grades K-12 (2014). First, utilizing the New York

State Education Department's school district enrollment data for 2022-2023, I identified every K-12 operating district in New York State. Using this data, I found that New York State has 198 districts with K-12 enrollment below 1000 students. I confirmed this data with NCES rural schools (classifications 41/42/43). I then identified districts in two regions: Leatherstocking and Southern Tier. I excluded the Adirondack, Hudson Valley, and Catskill region specifically due to the lack of internet services in the area. Using Creswell (2021) and Stake (1995) as two examples of case study, and qualitative research, I proceeded to collect materials which were published on open access as part of professional development workshops created for social studies teachers. I then proceeded to create a coding scheme using Saldania (2014) open coding methods, with a Krippendorff (2000) content analysis pattern to discover content presented, and verbiage utilized to convey to students expectations.

I then narrowed my search to two districts which were examples of what was presented on line. The teachers were not contacted, nor interviewed, as I wished to treat this as a true content analysis. The process was conducted over the course of the spring, 2022 semester (defined as January 15- May 15, 2022). Initial coding revealed the following themes:

Most of the materials are aligned with the New York State Regents Examination Framework.

Most of the materials are directly used from curriculum resources provided by a textbook publisher to teachers using the textbook.

Most of the materials are directly related to potential examination questions on the New York State Regents exams for 10th or 11th grade social studies.

Findings

Most of the practicing social studies teachers in rural UpState and Western New York were unaware of materials created by the Stanford History Education Group, and the C 3 Teachers. The majority of materials provided to teachers in professional development activities were heavily dependent on materials designed to meet, especially at the high school level, the New York State Regents Examination as end of course tests for 10th and 11th grade. The materials utilized in professional developments were often test exam questions from previous Regents exams. In one district, the materials used were peripheral materials provided by a major K-12 textbook publisher. The students were expected to complete worksheets from the textbook publisher, directly aligned to the textbook utilized in class.

The materials used in professional development and classroom instructions for another district emerged from materials created by the local social studies council on document-based essay questions. The students in this instance were expected to create an essay which utilized the documents and the prompt questions which were modeled on the Regents Exam which was aligned to the Regents exams from the previous decade. The assignment sought to have students look closely at the religions of the world, and identify the major elements of those religions.

College preparation classes for elementary and secondary students focus attention on a wide range of demands, including preparing teachers for the State mandated teacher certification exams. Examining the syllabus for at least three colleges in the regions identified above, I noticed a close relationship between the syllabus and teaching for the state standards, and the state certification exams. In one instance, a small liberal arts college combined social studies, English Language Arts and Arts as one methods course, with math, science and technology as the second

method of teaching course. In a larger, regional college, in service teachers were expected to implement their lessons based on the district's curriculum. In this particular district, the middle school social studies program was combined with Family and Consumer Science, and in no way met the New York State middle school standards for social studies.

Syllabi across multiple colleges demonstrate a concern for compliance by faculty to the accreditation and certification examinations. In many of the syllabi reviewed, policy and procedure was more than 50% of the document. Readings were often traditionally published "methods textbooks" from large publishers. Very few syllabus included assigned primary sources, but every single one included references to the New York State Learning Standards, and the New York State Regents aligned framework.

Discussion

Through informal conversations with fellow social studies teachers, teacher educators, and preservice teachers at the elementary and secondary level (spring 2022), I determined that most of the pre and in service teachers were not engaging with the new New York State Culturally Responsive and Sustaining Educational practices. Because the exams for high school students were in flux, the teachers believed their role was to ensure students were prepared for the test, and to tack closely to the assessment. "It's all about the test" as one colleague mentioned to me during an informal discussion. A preservice teacher communicated "social studies isn't even taught in my elementary school until after the state assessments." The ELA, math and science assessments for elementary students are administered in April. Another preservice teacher reported that the State ELA curriculum provided "enough" social studies and science for her cooperating teacher and building administrator.

Conclusion

This paper demonstrates a significant issue with the enactment of social studies in rural areas in the State. Utilizing publicly available information, it is clear that professional development in social studies and during class enactment is almost exclusively aligned to some standard or assessment. In the elementary grades, social studies has been discarded for ELA, math, and science, all tested subjects. In Middle School, social studies is a mandate, but not tested, and teachers are attempting to prepare students for the end of course Regents exams for grades 10 and 11. In high school, the grades 10 and 11 classes are preoccupied with mostly test prep, for both skills and content. Finally, many teachers in practice do not have curriculum material which is not produced by textbook publishers. If civics, and civics engagement are as important as politicians claim, more attention and resources must be devoted to schools, and the undergraduate and graduate programs who are producing teachers must receive support beyond the "accreditation test passage rate."

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Depictions of Rural & Appalachian Culture(s) in Comics & Graphic Novels

Jason D. DeHart

Abstract

In this article, a native of Appalachia who has worked in secondary and post-secondary literacy education examines the ways that comics depict life in the region. Particular attention is given to the exploration of the paranormal found in the work of Brian Level, and Level serves as a first-hand voice in this researched work. Additionally, the author explores comics that focus the Appalachian region in terms of masculinity, roles of women, and domestic life, alongside other social norms. In sum, the author wishes to push back on limited and problematic visions of the region, and to comment on the ways in which Appalachian life is rich, diverse, and profligate with literacy practices. The strength of female characters, mysticism in the region, and dialectical distinctions all emerge as patterns from the author's reading across visual literature, and the beauty of the region finds representation as well as juxtaposition with imagery in counterpoint through comics work.

Keywords: *comics, literacy, genre studies, Appalachia*

Introduction

When it comes to Appalachian life and culture, a number of problematic views persist, as do a number of counternarratives in various media. Perhaps one of the first images that might come to mind when thinking about this region is the reality television show approach, showcasing life in a mobile home, frequent sips of Mountain Dew, and questionable relationships and decisions among adults in the community. Or perhaps the image that comes to mind is the comedic crooning of George Clooney and fellow actors in the film, *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* Still yet, the book and film *Deliverance* might be the impression that some people have when they hear the term “Appalachia,” a sordid tale of sexuality, incest, and violence. When it comes to Appalachian literature, *The Floatplane Project* defines this genre or mode of literature as, “The easiest way to define it is to say that Appalachian literature is a wide and diverse field encompassing many historical periods, ethnicities of people, and generations of traditions” (n.p.), while noting that this definition is not all-inclusive of what this term might be used to designate.

Rather than add onto and reify these limited views of what I would contend is not a singular culture, but an assemblage of multiple cultures that occur in a particular geographic area, I lean toward descriptions of the strengths, abilities, and vital literacy practices found in work that can be termed rural or Appalachian. I am also drawn to stories that present narratives that stretch beyond these viewpoints, and which do not present the region as one from which to escape. My positionality as a life-long resident of Appalachia, so far spending time in West Virginia, Tennessee, and North Carolina, as well as my role as an assistant professor of literacy education in an Appalachian community, no doubt informs my perspective. I was also a middle school teacher in

an Appalachian community for almost a decade, and still continue to discover narratives in popular culture that operate within the limited boundaries of assumptions about the region, as well as depictions that serve to foster conversation beyond these myopic visions.

In this article, I examine the ways in which life and literacy practices are explored in enriching ways in graphic novels and comics that feature elements of rural and Appalachian communities. I have found that authors and artists sometimes take assumptions and reposition them in new ways through comics narratives. I mention comics as a go-to term to describe the medium as a particular kind of text with a specific set of grammatical principles (McCloud, 1993), even though the term “comics” is sometimes used to refer to shorter serial works, while “graphic novels” is used as a term of privilege to denote a longer/condensed/collected comics text (Baetens, 2011). In each textual section, I present an interviewed account of initial reading response from one of two readers/viewers of the text who also identify as long-time residents of the region.

Framing the Problem, Question, and Place

Hayes (2017) noted, “The correlation of Appalachia with ignorance and illiteracy, rather than linguistic or cultural difference, has even made appearances among scholars of English and literacy studies, fields that are notable for their advocacy of multicultural inclusiveness” (p. 72). Hayes (2017) went on to recount some of the ways in which readers, writers, and makers within the Appalachian region have worked in print to debunk the myth of illiteracy as a prevalent feature of Appalachia, including the creation of the magazine, *Foxfire*.

Donehower (2003) and Catte (2018) have both commented on the limited ways that Appalachian culture has been represented in media in spite of the rich and varied literacy practices in the region, and Purcell-Gates (1997) has documented the ways in which families encounter boundaries between communities and schools and negotiate limited conceptualizations of literacy. These researchers and others like them have described the ideologies and practices of Appalachian communities not as singular or limited depictions, but as rich and varied spaces occurring in a particular geography, complete with traditions, histories, and variations in spoken, written, and composed language(s). Part of this work involves the role of music, while other examples focus on dialectical distinctions. Clark (2019) noted the range of textual work that residents of Appalachia engage in, including “recording prayers, travels, key life events” and the prominent role of the family Bible as a central text (n.p.).

As researcher and resident, I seek to align myself with this counternarrative and push back on the limited framing of rural life and the Appalachian region. Such examination of comics has been employed in terms of rural life, but with attention to regions outside of the United States (Stenchly et al., 2019; Strömberg, 2016). In terms of Appalachia-specific considerations, very little has been published on this topic in relation to comics in recent years (Bowman & Groskopf, 2010; Relham, 1980).

In addition to my geographical affiliation, I am an avid comics reader and literacy advocate.

Methods

In order to accomplish this work, I first sought a range of comics that have been published and that depict life within or adjacent to Appalachia. I also looked for recent titles to add relevancy to the conversation and to serve a contemporary role in commenting on relatively current depictions. Considering these texts, I first read through them both to vet them as fruitful for conversation

and to assure their appropriateness for inclusion. I then engaged in a careful rereading, using multimodal content analysis (Serafini, 2022) to examine the ways that rural life is depicted. Comics are uniquely connected to this method as multimodal texts, working beyond one way of conveying meaning. In alignment with the method, I began an “area of interest,” developed an initial guiding research question, and located materials for analysis. This approach has allowed me to account for the grammar of comics (McCloud, 1993; Monnin, 2013), and has also allowed me to comment on the textual nature of these works, in terms of images, words, and overall design elements.

Additional responses from readers/viewers were conducted in two separate interviews with long-time residents of the region. Comments were audio-recorded, transcribed, and then checked with participants. This stage of the process allowed for first-hand experiences and accounts, ideally gathered in a qualitative interview setting (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009), and included perspectives beyond my own.

Mysticism and the Appalachian Gothic in *Silk Hills*

Appalachia is a region that is steeped in mythic ideas and stories, including stories of the supernatural (Roberts, 2019). The Southern Gothic tradition, which I here reframe as Appalachian Gothic, has been a literary feature since the early 19th century (Bjerre, 2017). Bjerre (2017) further notes the genre includes “the presence of irrational, horrific, and transgressive thoughts, desires, and impulses; grotesque characters; dark humor, and an overall angst-ridden sense of alienation” (n.p.). Many, if not all, of these elements are present in the graphic novel, *Silk Hills* (Level, Ferrier, Sherron, & Crank!, 2022). Supernatural elements and horror are, once more, woven in from the design and presentation of the cover of the book, with a pair of eyes open wide in fearful expression within the central axis of the cover. These eyes appear to belong to a character or creature whose exterior is devoid of skin, with muscle and sinew showing, and these symmetrical facial features are presented within the design of a winged butterfly, indicated by tufted wings and dark, oblong spots depicted diagonally at the top of each wing. A streak of butterfly silhouettes runs down the page in a central diagonal, shaded dark blue, and the title of the book appears in large typography in a ghostly bluish-white, with a spotted blue background. The effect of the cover is ethereal and haunting.

The title page, featuring the names and roles of the creative team, functions as a visual welcome to the reader/viewer, with a wooden road sign rising from tufts of grass or weeds. The message “Welcome to SILK HILLS” appears on the sign and the background of the image is a mingling of black and white, suggesting trees and other flora, as well as more butterflies or moths. The already-present motif of the butterfly or moth, for a resident of the Appalachian region, brings to mind the moth man legends of West Virginia (Clarke, 2022). Moth-like creatures are one of the malevolent forces in the graphic novel, and link back to this sense of body horror evoked by the figure presented on the book’s cover.

As the reader/viewer encounters the rural world of the book, the first page is rendered in five panels, vertically arranged, and increasingly thinner in size. The brownish-yellow and black coloration of the page’s settings contrast with the white-wooded setting in Panel A, as well as the pale character who is introduced in Panels B through E. The figure is depicted in detail as perspiring, mostly naked except for undershorts, and fearful. A sound in Panel C (“Klnk knk,” p. 7) indicates a presence out of frame, and the figure rises from a seated position, turns, and casts attention toward the source of noise. In response, Panel D depicts the characters as seated once more, intently scribbling on a page. The two lines of dialogue that occur on the page are: “D-Dad...” (Panel

B, p. 7), indicating the halted locution of the character, and "...H-Help" (Panel E, p. 7), completing the sentence. The last line of dialogue is spoken from the character out of frame as the reader/viewer encounters an image of the floorboards and the character's bare feet in a position that would appear to indicate restlessness, nervousness, or tension, with the big toe of the right foot overlapping the left big toe.

Once indicated a blur between the real and imagined, a feature of the Southern Gothic genre, the next page features a thin panel increasing in size and then decreasing once more, again arranged in a similar, vertical design of five-panel structure. The color scheme is the same, and the reader/viewer encounters the character depicted from slightly above and to the left. In Panel A, the character extends his arm and open hand, palm down and fingers outstretched, in wonder, eyes wide with a tremulous curiosity, while floor boards that appear to be broken provide a border on the left and right in Panel B. The reader/viewer is behind the character in Panel B, seeing what he sees, with his back to us, his arm outreached, and a central swirl of brownish-yellow, indicated the source of the noise (again, rendered as "Klnk Knk," p. 8). In a succession of images, the reader is presented with a chained arm wrapped in bandages reaching out from the portal (Panel C); a dangling bandaged figure emerging, fully wrapped as in a cocoon (Panel D); and a wide shot finishing the page, both the character and wrapped figure face to face, broken floor boards forming the background, as the wrapped figure saying, "Abel" (p. 8).

Here, within the first two pages and ten panels of the book, I trace the elements of Southern Gothic as outlined by Bjerre (2017) and seek initial alignment with the genre (Table 1).

Table 1: Elements of Southern Gothic

Element of Design/Genre from Bjerre (2017)	Presence in the Graphic Novel Text
"the presence of irrational, horrific, and transgressive thoughts, desires, and impulses" (n.p.)	While presented as a realized depiction on these pages, the first panels in the text demonstrate an irrational sensibility, with the disappearance of traditional boundaries of physical space blending with metaphysical (re)presentation in the swirling configuration presented in the text and the breaking up the floor boards into a shattered border, perhaps indicating a break in reality. The reader's viewpoint over the shoulders of the character perhaps indicate an entrance into the character's mind/perspective, and the reality of the images presented therein cannot be verified.
"grotesque characters" (n.p.)	Grotesque characters are (re)presented in three ways at the outset of the story and each character that is present is rendered in a grotesque manner, including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The figure who decorates the book's cover, with muscle and sinew showing.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The character who is (re)presented as alone, emaciated, and mostly nude in the first panels. - The supernatural figure, wrapped in bandages and hanging upside down, who enters the last panels in this section of the text.
<p>“dark humor, and an overall angst-ridden sense of alienation” (n.p.)</p>	<p>While humor has not yet (re)presented, alienation is evident in the solitary and secluded nature of the setting in the first panel on the first page; this alienation is then felt once more when the reader encounters the character, existing alone and communicating only through letters, in the panels that follow.</p>

It is worth noting, once more, that the creators of this graphic novel accomplished each of these elements at the outset of the story. As the narrative unfolds, more astral elements and body horror are included that further position the book within this mode of Appalachian Gothic storytelling. Reader Two responded to the book and noted, “I grew up with ghost stories in West Virginia. Those were some of my favorite shows, you know, growing up. I remember book orders at school, which was one of the only ways we could get a lot of books, and I would dig into those, kind of, supernatural stories. This book took me back there, and it reminded me a lot of the legends and stories I would hear about places I grew up near” (personal communication, August 2022).

The sense of mysticism, mystery, and even horror are alive and well in stories like this one, and the continued unfolding of legend-focused storytelling is a literacy practice that has made its way to the comics field.

Considering the Role of Women in *Appalachian Assassin*

In *Appalachian Assassin*, Petty (2020) et al. tell the story of a former soldier, wounded and left for dead, who returns to Appalachia and engages in training a young woman – albeit, in problematic ways. The woman, a Tennessean who has escaped an abusive relationship, begins to break the stereotypes of the female victim/domestic worker/at-home figure. The book’s cover features the tagline: “Silly boys...Military Black Ops are for GIRLS!” (n.p.), demonstrating the intent of repositioning gender roles from the beginning. At its best, the narrative shows a woman who emerges as strong and victorious. That journey is yet one of troubled representation.

Rezek (2010) has examined the dynamics of gender roles in Appalachia, specifically in West Virginia, and presented a study based on the lived experiences of eight young Appalachian women, first identified as mothers. Each woman in the study became a mother before the age of 18. Rezek (2010) examined the amount of support the women experienced, the notion of a “kin network” (p. 134). In *Appalachian Assassin*, the first image we encounter is on the cover, once more, with the young female character sitting between two male-presenting characters, holding an assault rifle aloft. A photographic image is the next (re)presentation of a female character, leaning against a pickup truck and holding a similar rifle aloft. The first page/splash page features a full-grown woman in embryonic depiction, surrounding by a pink circle, naked, and curled in the fetal position. A green border decorates this image with a heart monitor banner at the bottom of the

page. This image immediately brings to mind the centrality of motherhood in the woman's role in Appalachian culture and promises to reposition/rework the idea of birth and rebirth.

The contrast of the adult woman, not infantilized in the embryonic position but fully in adulthood, aligns with similar contrasts on the page. A quote from Sun-Tzu's *Art of War* (2007, reprinted) hovered in centered position above the topic of the image, and the quote speaks of the role of simulation in terms of order, fear, and weakness. Notably, the role of the woman in Appalachia in a traditional framing might be seen as one who keeps domestic order, one who exists in the shadow of a male figure, and one who represents an uncertain balance of strength and fortitude, as well as a Protestant-influenced focus on submission and weakness.

Petty et al. (2020) make clear the intention to reorder and reposition this limiting configuration from the cover, end pages, and initial image/quote – yet fails to do so in particularly striking ways. A floating line of dialogue that hovers above the lifeline image shares the name of the female main character (Jo Betty), with the message, “Come back, Jo Betty. Ya got work to do. It ain't ya time yet” (Petty et al, 2020, p. 6). This image, then, might be considered a kind of rebirth for both the female character and a hint of a similar, juxtaposed experience for Jesse, the main male character. Page two features three slender panels of darkness with floating dialogue on the first tier. The absence of images serves to illustrate the darkness, the experience of unconsciousness/borders of consciousness experienced by Jo, and the darkness continues through the first panel of tier two on page two before an illustrated panel depicts Jesse, not Jo, from a distance, wounded, followed by a close-up of his face.

The first reader/viewer's first impression of Appalachia is demonstrated through an inset narrative box, locating the story in Hancock County, Tennessee, with Jesse in the foreground and the depiction of a bar setting in the background. In four successive panels that are told in vertical arrangement on the right side of the page, Jesse encounters local residents and, from top to bottom, a conflict quickly escalates among the male characters in the setting, emerging from a conversation about manhood, again speaking to gender roles. In the exchange of dialogue, one male character comments on the order that Jo has placed: “Diet soda? What kinda **man** orders diet soda?” (Petty et al., 2020, p. 10). The author/creators of the book draw attention with additional weight to the word “man,” while a second character says, “Ah don't think he's a man at all!” (p. 10).

This exchange calls into question in direct fashion the “manhood,” or masculine gender role of the main character, based on the decision to order a beverage that is denoted as weaker in the scene. The dialogue contains facets of Appalachian dialect (“kinda;” “Ah”). When the reader/viewer encounters Jo, she is presented as a destitute solitary figure trudging through snow, and a narrative inset box informs the reader this is also taking place in Tennessee. At this point, we are well into the narrative and our hint of who Jo is or will become has only been relayed through the initial fetal image and panels of darkness. Her position in these panels and clearly one of victimization as evidenced by her solitude (Panel A) and weariness (Panel C). When a school bus speeds by, a wave of dirty slush strikes her in the face, with a final inset panel (Panel E) demonstrating a further sense of pain and weariness.

Jo is next seen entering a classroom. While other children have sped by on the bus, it is clear that she is an outsider, walking in the snow. The first panel presenting Jo at school features dialogue from a teacher who is unseen and remains so until the bottom of the page in the last panel. The reader/viewer is informed that Jo is a frequently tardy student through this exchange, and there is a parallelism that occurs on the page as another student, a male-presenting character, hurls a stick pin-laden wad of paper of Jo, striking her in the neck, resulting in a “*nasty* puncture” (Petty et al., 2020, p. 15). Images of homelife, then, do little to present Jo as a strong character, and depict

the male figure in the home as an abusive character. The father figure notes that Jo is an unwanted character in the home and the narrative directly hints at a series of incestuous abuses that have taken place in the home, with the indication that this is a normal feature of life for Jo.

While these initial (re)presentations of Jo do little to reposition her as a character of agency, this dynamic works different by the end of the book. The beginning of this change is sparked when Jesse meets Jo. In what could have been an affirming partnership, their relationship instead is (re)presented as one in which he essentially purchases her from her father. Jo calls Jesse “sir,” the two have a strange relationship that is a blend of submission and romance. The aesthetic of the character and storyline again shifts to a militaristic/agentive tone, mirroring the initial panels (re)presenting Jesse’s experience by the time the reader/viewer encounters act three.

Jo’s affiliation with Jesse eventually becomes a passing on/embracing of gender roles beyond those assigned to problematic and limiting depictions of Jo as a victim/sexualized character, and yet does so by drawing upon those qualities as an aspect of her training (for example, when Jo fails to best a group of men in combat, she is offered up as a sexual object for the men). Act two of the book, in particular, features this movement from object/victim to character with a growing yet limited agency in an apprenticeship kind of format and leads into further working in this manner in act three. Act three also begins with dialogue that includes the notion a reconfiguring of domestic roles for men and women (the narrative does not address roles for members of the region who identify as nonbinary), while also reinforcing gender dynamics as the speaker informs Jesse that he should not share his thoughts about sharing domestic duties, as Jo will hear him.

By the time the end of the book arrives, Jo has transformed to a more independent figure, and yet her newfound role has come at a cost as an extension of abuse. The text makes attempts at becoming more, and yet fails to do so in a number of ways, including the hint of expanding roles without appropriate follow-through, the continued sexualization of the main female character, and the continued (re)presentation of the male as a dominant character who passes agency onto the female in a bizarre and sexualized apprenticeship.

Reader One responded to this text and noted, “As a woman who comes from this area, I first want to say that I appreciate what the comic tried to do. There were moments where I saw that this book could be more, but then I saw where the writers went with it. I liked where the character eventually got to, but there’s too much in the early part and the journey that needs to be reworked” (personal communication, August 2022).

Affiliation, Conflict, and Political Identities in *Warlords of Appalachia*

Of final consideration, the four-issue series, *Warlords of Appalachia* (Johnson et al., 2017) presents a stark look at the region as an isolated space and one in which characters stand up in self-reliant opposition to dynamics of despotism. In constructing the book, Johnson noted in a 2016 interview, “My research took me from the Civil War to the Old West to Robert Heinlein to Appalachian Studies college textbooks to CNN to church hymnals” (n.p.), and noted that he and the rest of the creative team behind the book had done a lot of work focused on world building, including the creation of a group called the Waterborn, intended as a reference to Baptist denominations, as well as dialectical and colloquial distinctions in the dialogue.

The opening pages of the book depict a setting in Kentucky with an inset panel showcasing a radio show host name (“Oren Roth is...,” p. 3), and the all capital words “ON THE AIR,” with dialogue stemming from outside the panel: “Who do you trust, America?” (Johnson et al., 2017, p. 3). The presence of the word “trust” immediately evokes as sense of outsider status, and the

dynamic of trust and distrust, as well as independence and isolationism that is sometimes associated with Appalachian culture (Coyne et al., 2006; Lewis & Billings, 1997) in both economic and health-related factors. Providing a counterpoint, Gamson suggested that the emergence of celebrity culture and popular culture as a nationwide reality and social practice presents contemporary residents with a restructured approach, where such barriers and sense of isolationism have been broken down or dispelled (Hoopes & Heverin, 2010). Previous work I have done (DeHart, 2019) has examined the dynamics of filmic and digital work in Appalachian school settings, and educators in this study indicated similar results of digital and cultural connections fostered through multimodal texts. Adams (2015) has spoken of similar trends in connections made possible in Appalachian regions by digital connections.

A series of diagonally stacked narrative boxes on the first page of *Warlords of Appalachia* provide the background for the story, which takes place in an alternative future in the midst of a second Civil War. Religious extremism is noted as a central element of this new Civil War (Johnson et al., issue 1, 2017), and the United States have now been retitled “Affiliated States of America” (p. 3). Oren Roth then comments in a narrative box near the final panel of the page that residents of the region are “better off than they’ve even been,” illustrating the notion of flourishing in a resilient ability to stand on one’s own (Johnson et al., 2017, issue 1, p. 3). The background image on this first page, which stands behind three floating panels and the narrative boxes, shows a mountain-bounded area with dilapidated structures, including a gas station, and a skull resting in a crevice behind a roll of barbed wire.

Reader Two noted, “I immediately thought of a coal town when I saw this. When you’ve been in the places I’ve been in, you know what a coal town looks like, and how it feels abandoned by everything and everybody” (personal communication, August 2022). Linking with this takeaway, Johnson (2016) stated, “The story starts in Red Rock, a town that was built on coal mining, but where the coal has long since dried up. Even in real life, these towns can look pretty impoverished, and in *Warlords*, a war has also been fought here” (n.p.).

This stark image is juxtaposed with the beauty that is found in the Appalachian region as the vantage is pulled back to a view of the town from the mountains above, with more foggy mountains in the background. Providing another element of juxtaposition with this beauty, the pattern of diagonally arranged narrative boxes continues on this page in Panel A, with dialogue that notes that residents of Kentucky have now been considered terrorists and that residents continue to be seen by some as “Inbred, toothless illiterates who make drugs in the same barrels they bathe in” (Johnson et al., 2017, issue 1, p. 4), with further commentary about the role of religion in the area and the curious linking of guns with this sensibility. Page five begins with Roth’s continued commentary: “So *don’t listen* to the media that paints a picture of Kentucky as the poor, downtrodden, righteous victim” (Johnson et al., issue 1, 2017), again reconfiguring the narrative of poverty and victimization that sometimes is applied to the region. From this peaceful and idyllic scene, the tension present in the dialogue escalates into militaristic conflict.

Throughout the narrative, the main character, Kade Mercer, survives and exists as a kind of messiah figure. Elements of religion are woven into the commentary that surrounds this character, and much of the story acts as a kind of action-oriented plot in which the identity of the region is engaged with a struggle with outside forces. Catte (2018) has commented on the political diversity of the Appalachian region, and the story of *Warlords of Appalachia* seems to take the view of residents of this region as zealots as one within a counternarrative in which characters exist in opposition to zealotry. The final image of the leader of this despotic landscape, the President, includes the dialogue: “Only I can fix our divided nation,” linking to similar statements from former

President Donald Trump. This sense of leader and solitary figure/savior is juxtaposed to Kade's affiliation with a network of individuals, a grassroots group of rebels who are seeking agency for the region. The President's dialogue is presented above a notepad on which he has scribbled words like "Kentucky," "Mercer," and "Die" (Johnson et al. 2017, issue 4, page 24). In terms of the political message, Johnson noted, "I think any artist has an obligation to create work that matters to them, especially when that means dealing with current events...I just want to tell stories that I've poured my blood into, and make that connection with the reader" (2016, n.p.).

There is a dynamic of independence and, once more, isolation that is sometimes tied to the Appalachian region; yet, this sense is presented as an affiliation with a leader who is in opposition to members of the region, while kinship and community are more closely aligned with the presentation of Kade and his network of allies. This (re)presentation calls into question assumptions about the region as one that is fiercely independent for the sheer sake of independence, rather than as an element of questioning what it means to be a member of community. By creating the story as he has, Johnson allows for a narrative that engages a genre-related sensibility with appeal for readers/viewers who enjoy action-oriented stories, and yet has provided a text that can invite further discussion about the values of independence, community, freedom, and responsibility.

Conclusions and Linking Themes

In each of these stories, Appalachia has been presented within a dynamic of one kind or another. The creators of these comics and graphic novels acknowledge the stereotypes of the region in a variety of ways – either by presenting as a cycle of experiences from characters, elements of regional mythology, or as despotic messaging shared in contrast to the realities of the region. Each creator then attempts to push back or expand on this set of assumptions through narrative exploration and multimodal presentation.

In *Silk Hills*, the mythology and isolation of rural life is drawn upon and celebrated for narrative effect in a contemporary story. In *Appalachian Assassin*, the central female character promises to embryonically transform from the traditional and stereotypical female victim/mother figure/object of sexuality to a character with greater agency. Some of this agency is eventually accomplished, but at a narrative cost that is too steep, and in ways which further sexualize and objectify the female character. There is work yet to do in comics to more widely and thoughtfully (re)present the roles that women and nonbinary folx play in Appalachian culture. Finally, in *Warlords of Appalachia*, the questions of isolation and individualism are contrasted with a national despot who frames himself as a solitary savior.

I now arrive at the question of what makes a story "Appalachian," and what qualifies a story as a marker of thoughtful reflection. While a range of features might be included, I have chosen three which serve as links to the texts that have been part of this discussion. Reader One noted, "There's the place, the setting, but there is also a feeling of the place that is harder to pin down" (personal communication, August 2022). This feeling that the reader describes might be summed up through an examination of characteristics that have been shared by researchers in a variety of areas of interest in the region. Namely:

1. A sense of spirituality or mysticism. While not always the case and while not always even a positive experience, a sense of spirituality or questions of faith mark experiences in the region, from the roles of women (Burkhardt, 1993) to comics-based memoirs of life growing up in the region (Massie, 2019). This sense of the mystic is present in *Silk*

Hills, albeit in frightening ways, while Johnson explored Appalachian culture's inclusion of religion and reworked it for a dystopian context. To maintain a sense of quality within Appalachian literature, the graphic novel works as an example of a text that does not draw upon this spirituality or mysticism as a function of ignorance or fear, but as a working component of the story.

2. A style of literature that “preserves and promotes traditions, vernacular speech patterns, folklore” (Clark, 2019, p. 1). The dialectical distinctions of the region make their way into dialogue, particularly noted in *Appalachian Assassin* and *Warlords of Appalachia*. The notion of tradition is explored in the dynamic of fealty and independence in *Warlords*, as well as the (re)presentation of features like coal towns in this text. Work that captures tradition within the Appalachian region, particularly in comics, uses words and images in a manner that depicts rather than criticizes modes of discourse, including spoken and written language, as well as literacy engagements and depictions of community practices.
3. Women as strong and central characters. Scholars have noted for some time that the depiction of women in Appalachian stories can be framed from a strengths-based and asset-based perspective (Ganim, 1986; Hanlon, 2000; Helton & Keller, 2010). While *Appalachian Assassin* bears the markers of making this comics-narrative argument, the (re)presentation of women in comics is historically problematic (O'Brien, 2014). Further work can be done to position this movement in roles in Appalachian comics.

Accounts of the Appalachian region are varied in terms of literacy practices, and this variance can be seen in the structure that comics narratives linked to the region take on. Let us consider yet more stories to be told, and the critical need to move beyond deficit narratives for Appalachia, comics, and beyond.

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The Costs of COVID: A Comparative Analysis of K-12 curriculum delivery in Illinois & Iowa Rural School Districts as a Result of Varying Pandemic Mandates

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Abstract

In March 2020, COVID-19 resulted in school closures for the remainder of the 2019-2020 school year across the nation. Because of the pandemic predictions regarding the 2020-2021 school year, concerns regarding curricular offerings and delivery surfaced quickly. A non-experimental quantitative comparative study was conducted in two neighboring Midwestern states with different directives for the 2020-2021 school year. The attribute of rurality became important to this study regarding curricular offerings and delivery because of challenges related to the access of technological resources in rural areas. This non-experimental quantitative comparative study focused on Illinois, where 20.8% of its public schools are rural and Iowa, where over half of its public schools are rural. Purposive sampling was used and superintendents from rural public districts were invited to complete an online survey. Research questions focused on how state mandates impacted curriculum offered, curriculum delivery strategies used, and professional development on remote learning provided to teachers before the start of the 2020-2021 school year. The overall survey return rate was 22.30% with 67% from Illinois and 33% from Iowa. Most respondents worked in districts with enrollments of 1 to 999 students. The theoretical framework for this study was the top-down theory of policy implementation wherein top decision-makers assume a command and control orientation, generating clear and definite policies/strategies that are communicated to others to implement. This study is important because it provides superintendents with a reference point for how mandated state policies can impact student achievement through both curriculum and its delivery.

Keywords: *curriculum, return-to-learn, rural schools, policy implementation, top-down theory*

America is not like a blanket: one piece of unbroken cloth, the same color, the same texture, the same size. America is more like a quilt: many patches, many pieces, many colors, many sizes, all woven and held together by a common thread.
—Jesse Jackson

Introduction

Throughout the nation's history, one of the most enduring and common threads that has held American society together is that of public K-12 education. Education, as that common thread, is

the institution through which society provides its members with important knowledge, skills, values, and cultural norms (Macionis, 2005). While there are wide-ranging models and settings in which K-12 education is delivered, each contains certain commonalities through which the metaphor of the quilt is evident: 1) diverse learners (one resource); 2) curriculum content to be taught and assessed (the material); 3) instructional strategies to be implemented (the patterns); and 4) technologies to be used in teaching and learning (the tools). Finally and most importantly, the community and the people who serve the learners make up the strength of the K-12 public education quilt.

Collectively and periodically, the seams of the American education quilt have been stretched because of mandated education reform, but nothing has pulled at its seams as immediately and drastically as the March of 2020 declaration of the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result of this pandemic and the varying state mandated policies for the delivery of education during it, there have been and continue to be lasting effects at all levels of educational systems, and on the people who serve in them. This paper discusses study findings regarding how differing state-mandated policies impacted the delivery of education in rural public K-12 systems in the two neighboring Midwestern states of Illinois and Iowa.

Rurality as Foundational in this Study

When the term “rural” is mentioned, it quickly brings to mind images of open spaces, farms, and small towns and these settings are indeed the most likely locations for K-12 rural public schools and their districts (Cromartie & Bucholz, 2008). Mann et al. (2017) note that almost 30% of all American public schools are rural and educate approximately one-fifth of all public school students. While states may differ in their percentages of rural schools (ranging from 8.6% to 74.4%) the national average for the percentage of rural schools in the United States is 28.5% (Showalter et al., 2019). According to 2019 data from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), the average rural school in the country housed 368 students during the fall of 2019 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019).

Rural and Rurality Defined

The definition of “rural” varies by organization and takes into account population density and geographic isolation or boundaries. Among federal agencies in the nation alone, there are more than two dozen rural definitions being used (Cromartie & Bucholz, 2008). For example, while the United States Census Bureau defines “rural” as encompassing all population, housing, and territory that is not included within an urban area (United States Census Bureau, 2022), the United States Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service defines it as places or towns with fewer than 2,500 people (United States Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service, n. d.).

Ruff (2020) points out that there is no standard definition for the term “rural”. Due to this lack of a standard definition, there is potential for confusion resulting from the varied definitions that do exist. Therefore, researchers must choose an appropriate definition from those that exist for their research studies, and for this study, it was essential that a commonly used definition of rural (for both Illinois and Iowa) be used.

One such appropriate available definition for use was that which comes from the NCES. Working in conjunction with the United States Census Bureau (U. S. Census Bureau), NCES has assigned each school district a locale code which designates it as one of the following four basic

types: city, suburban, town, or rural. Within each of these types are three subtypes. City and suburban each have the three subcategories of “large,” “midsize,” and “small” while town and rural each have the three subcategories of “fringe,” “distant,” and “remote” (Geverdt, 2017).

“Rural-Fringe” (NCES locale code #41) is defined as a “Census-defined rural territory that is less than or equal to 5 miles from an Urbanized Area, as well as rural territory that is less than or equal to 2.5 miles from an Urban Cluster” (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d., Locale Definitions). Using this same resource, “Rural-Distant” (NCES locale code #42) is defined as a “Census-defined rural territory that is more than 5 miles but less than or equal to 25 miles from an Urbanized Area, as well as rural territory that is more than 2.5 miles but less than or equal to 10 miles from an Urban Cluster. Finally, citing the same source, “Rural-Remote” (NCES locale code #43) is defined as a “Census-defined rural territory that is more than 25 miles from an Urbanized Area and also more than 10 miles from an Urban Cluster.” It is important to note that in creating these definitions, the NCES and the U.S. Census Bureau did not use student enrollment numbers as the definition’s basis. Therefore, some districts with larger enrollments have been assigned a rural locale code due to their geographic location.

General Rural Characteristics of Illinois Public Schools

Small rural school districts in Illinois equate to 57.6% with one in five Illinois schools (20.8%) being located in a rural area (Showalter et al., 2019) and the average Illinois rural school has just over 2 school buildings (Yun & Kinkley, 2019). The overall rural student population in Illinois (8.7%) reflects: 1) stable residences with low racial diversity and poverty rates; 2) nine out of ten students graduating in four years; and 3) a high rate of students who qualify for individualized education services (Showalter et al., 2019).

General Rural Characteristics of Iowa Public Schools

One in three of Iowa’s public school students are served by rural schools with half of Iowa’s schools being located in rural districts (Showalter et al., 2019). As of April of 2022, Iowa had 327 K-12 public school districts of which 104 had fewer than 500 students (Mensching, 2022). Iowa rural students tend to be less diverse than those nationally (Showalter et al., 2019).

The Illinois and Iowa Rural Superintendent Study on K-12 Curriculum as a Result of Varying Pandemic Mandates

Background of the Study

The worldwide COVID-19 pandemic was declared on March 11, 2020 by the World Health Organization, and countries were implored to take action to contain the virus (Cucinotta & Vanelli, 2020; World Health Organization, 2020). Suddenly, public education systems were thrust into mass disruption. Phrases such as “quarantine,” “social distancing,” and “contact tracing” became part of the daily conversations among leadership, and city, suburban, town, and rural school districts alike were forced to close in domino-like fashion throughout the nation. Ohio was the first state to close its K-12 public schools for a tentative period of time on March 12, 2020 (Education Week, 2020; Ujifusa, 2020). By the end of the next day, Illinois was among fourteen other states to make the same tentative closure decision (Ujifusa, 2020). Iowa quickly followed on March 15 (Education Week, 2020). Eventually, all states, after playing a game of “wait and see,” closed their

doors for any face-to-face or in-person learning for the remainder of the school year by May 6, 2020. The exceptions to this were Wyoming and Montana who kept postponing their decision until the school year expired. Illinois and Iowa made the decision to close for the remainder of the school year on April 17 (Education Week, 2020). As a result of these national closures, the education of nearly 50 million students was affected (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2022; Zviedrite et al., 2021; Ujifusa, 2020). Subsequently, from that point in time and literally overnight, states were relegated to educating students remotely. Student instruction was delivered synchronously with a teacher and students live online or asynchronously through respective district/school software already in use to some capacity (i.e. Google classroom) or with paper and pencil packets on their own at different times (Greener, 2021). While the spring semester of the 2019-2020 school year was rife with new state mandates resulting from the pandemic, so, too, was the upcoming 2020-2021 school year. District leaders found themselves not only complying with these shifting pandemic mandates but also developing specific “return-to-learn” (RTL) plans for the upcoming 2020-2021 school year, all the while not fully knowing what to anticipate. Due to increased public scrutiny of the state mandates issued, the pandemic became even more politicized which impacted the decisions that school district leaders made regarding the delivery of student instruction.

Illinois Specific Educational Mandates (March-May 2020)

From the onset of the pandemic, the response in Illinois was guided by the Illinois state public health agency and focused on ensuring the health and safety of Illinoisans. In late March, following the mandated closure of all 4, 244 schools, affecting over 2.8 million students, the Illinois State Board of Education produced *Remote Learning Recommendations During COVID-19 Emergency*. This document provided information and clarification to district and school leaders, teachers, students, and parents as they designed and implemented remote learning (Illinois State Board of Education, 2020a, p.1). A theme of the guidance outlined by the state board of education was that of consistent efforts in thought, planning, implementation, and monitoring of remote learning. The state board purported that “a school community can be connected and thriving even if the physical school building is closed” (Illinois State Board of Education, 2020a, p. 9).

Further, this document outlined numerous recommendations regarding both instruction and grading. Specifically, the instructional focus was on meeting the needs of learners in a respectful and planful manner, documenting efforts to meet the needs of students from special populations (i.e. multilingual learners and special education), selecting content for remote learning that was aligned with the state standards, and engaging in consistent communication with students, families, and staff to understand how the health emergency was impacting them (Illinois State Board of Education, 2020a, p. 2). Grading recommendations reflected an emphasis on learning rather than compliance, thereby encouraging districts to allow students to redo or make up work assigned prior to the mandated school closure. To allow for such flexibility, districts were challenged to provide alternative assessment measures for all content areas and to include such concessions as electronic submission of assignments. Teachers were to operate under the principle of “causing no educational harm” to any child (Illinois State Board of Education, 2020a, p. 19). It bears repeating that the driving force behind the recommendations for instruction and grading were keeping children engaged in a way that supported emotional safety. An additional concern during this timeframe, and a part of the state issued guidance document, was the well-being of the staff and students. An emphasis on eating, sleeping, exercising, and stress management were among several topics addressed in this document. (Illinois State Board of Education, 2020a, p. 13).

Ongoing professional development designed to meet the remote learning needs of students was noted in the guidance document. Support for educators was of utmost importance, and the document generated ideas that districts could employ to offer opportunities to teachers whereby they could continue to build their skills to meet the remote learning needs of their students. Ideas included scheduling virtual workshops to better understand staff needs and deliver insightful “just-in-time” guidance on pertinent topics (i.e., working with a student who might struggle with online learning), providing staff an annotated hyperlinked bibliography of accessible free resources to support instructional decisions, and providing training on the impact of trauma and stress to support teachers’ understanding of how children may have been responding to the stress they were enduring (Illinois State Board of Education, 2020a, p. 14).

Because this guidance document underscored the social emotional needs of students as the driving force of all educational efforts, basic needs of students were of utmost concern. Suggestions regarding supporting student learning during remote instruction were included and emphasized considerations for the length of time students, at a respective grade level, should spend engaged in online/remote learning on any given day. Additionally, the document encouraged a variety of enrichment activities tailored to support overall mental, physical, and spiritual health (Illinois State Board of Education, 2020a, pp. 16-18). Every effort for every Illinois school district during these spring months was to “do no harm” (Illinois State Board of Education, 2020b). This message permeated throughout.

Iowa Specific Educational Mandates (March-May 2020)

In Iowa, the focus of the governor was to keep Iowa’s students safe while continuing to provide educational services to all students. The governor held daily press conferences, as did many governors during the early weeks of the pandemic, as decisions relating to education and public safety helped Iowans respond as COVID-19 cases surged throughout the spring months. Flesher (2020b) shares that the directive to close all of Iowa’s 1, 322 school buildings was not easy for Governor Kim Reynolds, but it was necessary for safety reasons due to the anticipation of positive COVID-19 cases rising in Iowa. Teachers taught via remote learning and online classes and they were encouraged to be creative in providing services to the over 530,000 now homebound students. Districts scrambled to learn about best practices for online education. Districts recognized that many students did not have internet access from home or because of their remote residential location, they lacked internet access due to a poor internet signal. To try to combat the challenge of access, some districts purchased portable internet hotspots for students who did not have access to the internet or they encouraged parents to access the school’s internet from its parking lot (Fleig, Opsahl, & Rolands, 2020). Other districts sought to form a partnership with companies such as Mediacom to connect students, from qualifying households, to broadband internet service in their home, with the district paying for the cost of these connections. Hot spots became ubiquitous, often being the primary source of the internet connection (Bogaards, 2021). The name of the game became improvisation and partnership, and the goal was to mitigate the disparities caused by the digital divide.

To offer support to districts, the Iowa Department of Education (IDoE) instructional support consultants created a bank of webinars for school administrators focused on instructional support for PK-12 students and highlighting the expectations of the IDoE throughout the remainder of the school year. Additionally, the IDoE provided targeted guidance documents for students being served on Individual Education Plans under the umbrella of special education in an effort to

ensure that the parameters of a Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) were being met. The documents referenced guidance underscored by the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) and included information about meeting the provision of FAPE, meeting evaluation timelines, completing annual reviews, gathering data, participating in mediation, student extended absences from instruction, and providing Early ACCESS during the time of district closure (Iowa Department of Education, 2020a). Interestingly, Iowa’s state board of education was more reserved in its involvement, deferring to the IDoE to assume the dominant role in directing schools regarding guidance for remote learning. In late March, the IDoE indicated their role was to ensure a minimum standard of care while allowing maximum opportunities for growth through flexibility (Flesher, 2020a). They issued a document that focused on the provision of continuous learning that guided districts as they tried to navigate the uncontrollable consequences of the pandemic. The two primary approaches to continuous learning outlined were voluntary enrichment opportunities and required educational services. Similar to Illinois, the IDoE emphasized the voluntary element of the remaining days of the 2019-2020 school year. Neither grades nor credit were awarded and attendance was an engagement indicator rather than a requirement. The focus was to engage students. Table 1 outlines the basic similarities and differences between the two states amidst their initial response to school closures and providing educational opportunities to students.

Table 1: Comparison of States COVID Spring 2020

Key Concepts	Illinois	Iowa
Mandated school closing	March 13, 2020	March 15, 2020
Final decision to close for remaining 2019-20 school year	April 17, 2020	April 17, 2020
Students affected by closing	2.8 million	530,000
Attendance	Voluntary	Voluntary
Grading	No make-up of lost time	No make-up of lost time
	Learning v. compliance	Learning v. compliance
	No student can fail	No student can fail
IEP instruction	Credits not denied	Credits not denied
	Remote and focused on minimal to meet FAPE	Remote and focused on minimal to meet FAPE
	Direct, Specific, Task Force Collaboration	Indirect, General, IDoE Guidance

As both states hastened to respond to the continued educational needs of their students during the initial weeks of pandemic, the multitude of moving pieces caused some gaps in services, which, while frustrating for parents, educators, and students, was not surprising. What the initial weeks of the pandemic did bear witness to was the undisputed effort of so many dedicated people working in the education sector to do what could be done to serve, in some capacity, the needs of the students. As the end of the spring 2020 semester neared, thoughts shifted to returning to school in the fall for the 2020-2021 school year. Both states worked with their respective public health departments and state departments of education to plan for a safe return to the educational facilities that had been closed to them since March, 2020.

Planning for a 2020-2021 Return to Learning (Illinois)

In the latter parts of June and July, 2020, Illinois disseminated two separate documents to school districts outlining guidance for transitioning to learning for the new school year. The document produced in June was a joint effort with the Illinois Department of Public Health and outlined a plethora of topics associated with reopening schools safely and thoughtfully to in-person

learning (Illinois State Board of Education & Illinois Department of Public Health Working Group, 2020). The second document, published in late July by the Illinois State Board of Education provided “recommendations to educators for implementing in-person, blended, and/or remote learning during the 2020-21 school year” (Illinois State Board of Education, 2020c, p.5). These recommendations referenced the need for individual districts to be empowered to make local decisions as per their unique circumstances and use the document to support their efforts to minimize any negative impact of their circumstances and maximize recovery and learning for all (p. 5).

An underlying premise of the efforts to return to school was that the “return to school is ‘not business as usual’ but rather the convergence of new reality in educational excellence in Illinois” (Illinois State Board of Education & Illinois Department of Public Health Working Group, 2020, p. 8). The learning recommendations fully recognized that while the state board of education recommended in-person learning, they encouraged local control and empowered school leaders to make decisions that honored their local needs (Illinois State Board of Education, 2020c, p.5). Learning recommendations encouraged districts to implement various teaming opportunities to engage in assessment of loss of learning status and develop a plan for responding to such learning loss through the creation of learning goals, the collection and evaluation of data, the support for teacher efforts in differentiation, the prioritization of learning standards for more in-depth study, the assessment of effectiveness of instructional strategies, and the provision of social-emotional support (p. 9-10). Furthermore, this document integrated structural recommendations to support student learning. Such recommendations underscored the attention to classroom organization, social distancing, and the use of blended learning in more structurally restricted circumstances (p. 26-31). Finally, this document detailed recommendations for learners from special populations (i.e., multilingual learners and special education). Each element, respective to the specific population, provided recommendations and considerations about planning, instructional delivery, and feedback/assessment (p. 32-101). This comprehensive document served as flagship for all Illinois districts as they prepared to return to in-person learning in the fall of 2020.

Planning for a 2020-2021 Return to Learning (Iowa)

The Iowa Department of Education (IDoE) worked in consultation with the Iowa Department of Public Health to develop a safe and responsible return-to-learn plan. The document framed return-to-learn options using community transmission rates within a specific time period. Based on positivity rates, the plan suggested mitigation strategies and offered insight regarding which return-to-learn plan (on-site, hybrid, continuous remote) to employ, how to handle confirmed cases of COVID-19 on-site, and identified at what point a staff or student could return to school (Iowa Department of Education & Iowa Department of Public Health, 2020). Logically, the higher the positivity rates, the more restrictive the learning model. To offer guidance regarding the academic element, the IDoE created and distributed a template for continuous learning to all districts. The template served as a checklist to support schools as they considered critical aspects of the development and delivery of education programming. (Iowa Department of Education, 2020b). Finally, the IDoE provided a companion support document to the return-to-learn guidance document previously mentioned that specified seven critical areas and considerations that would, more specifically, support efforts aligned to the return-to-learn template: leadership, infrastructure, health & safety, academic standards, social-emotional & behavioral health, equity, and data. The document was presented in table form and linked to various supplemental resources (Iowa Department of Education, 2020c).

Both Illinois and Iowa reflected intentional efforts to mitigate their concerns about the loss of learning experienced by students amid the COVID-19 pandemic school closings. As states worked with stakeholders in some capacity to return to in-person instruction, the stronghold of the pandemic would remain for months as families prepared to send their children back to school and districts prepared to receive them amid what would end up becoming a political fire focused on elements other than student learning. The table below reflects the primary similarities and differences between Illinois and Iowa districts in preparing for a return to learning in the fall of 2020.

Table 2 : Comparison of States Return-to-Learn Guidance Efforts, Fall 2020

Key Concepts	Illinois	Iowa
Worked with Department of Public Health	Yes	Yes
Worked collaboratively to develop return to learn plan guidance	Yes	No
Focused on local control	Yes	Yes
Required submission of local return to learn plan to state	No	Yes
Guidance focus on equity	Yes	Yes
Guidance focus on recovery of learning loss	Yes	Yes

Study Methodology

Need for the Study

With the March 2020 proclamation of the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic, the United States Department of Labor, through its Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), provided some workplace guidance and recommendations for states. However, OSHA was quick to point out that these were not regulations nor did they create any new legal obligations; they were simply advisory in nature (United States Department of Labor, 2020).

Consequently, due to no homogeneous federal regulations or mandates for states, each state was left to determine its own parameters and policies for safety in their various workplace settings. In addition to determining policies for safety, states were also tasked with determining a variety of other policies and parameters which included those affecting the education sector, specifically addressing how education might best continue to be provided during the pandemic. Thus, the need for this study is derived from the lack of federal action and specifically explores the impact of state created mandates and policies on K-12 educational delivery during the pandemic.

Purpose of the Study and Study Questions

The purpose of this non-experimental quantitative comparative study conducted in the two rural neighboring Midwestern states of Illinois and Iowa was to examine how very different pandemic-related state mandates for the 2020-2021 school year impacted the K-12 curriculum offered, its delivery, and the professional development on remote learning provided to teachers before the start of the 2020-2021 school year. The specific research questions included:

- 1) How did state mandates impact curricular offerings?
- 2) How was the curriculum delivered at the start of the 2020-2021 school year?
- 3) How did state mandates impact the provision of professional development provided to teachers prior to the start of the 2020-2021 school year?

This paper reports the findings as gathered from K-12 Illinois and Iowa superintendent respondents from those school districts that have been designated as “Rural-Fringe,” “Rural-Distant,” and “Rural-Remote” by virtue of their assigned NCES locale code.

The Top Down Theory of Policy Implementation as the Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework used for this study was the top-down theory of policy implementation. This theory focuses on the capacity of top leaders and decision-makers to assume a command and control orientation that generates clear and definite policies and strategies that are communicated to others for implementation (Mazmanian & Sabatier, 1983; Nakamura & Smallwood, 1980).

This theoretical framework was appropriate for use as the study explored the impacts of top-down policies and authoritative decisions made by state leadership with regards to continuing to provide K-12 education during a pandemic.

Study Population and Sample

While convenience sampling (where a sample is drawn from a source that is conveniently accessible) could have been appropriate for this study, the researchers chose to use purposive sampling instead. It was selected because the population is one whose characteristics are relevant to the study (Andrade, 2021). In this study the key characteristics of having an NCES designated rural school district locale code and being a K-12 rural school district superintendent in Illinois or Iowa were essential. Purposive sampling is often referred to as judgment or expert sampling and certainly the 703 rural K-12 Illinois and Iowa superintendents would be experts having to implement the decreed state mandates during a world-wide COVID-19 pandemic.

Assumptions

An assumption is an assertion presumed to be true but not actually verified (Gay et al., 2012). There were four assumptions applied to this study, with the first being that survey respondents were practicing rural Illinois and Iowa K-12 public school district superintendents from March of 2020 throughout the 2020-2021 school year. The second assumption is their inclusion in the respective state directories of practicing superintendents was accurate. A third assumption was that the district’s designated NCES locale code of “rural” was correct. The fourth assumption was that participants understood and honestly answered the survey questions.

Limitations

Limitations are those aspects of the study that the researcher can not control but may negatively affect the study’s results (Gay et al., 2012). The two limitations for this study include the accuracy of the historical data provided by superintendents and the limited findings due to the number of superintendents who completed the survey.

Delimitations

Creswell & Creswell (2018) share that delimitations are those decisions the researcher makes to limit the scope of the study. The scope of this study was narrowed to a sample population of only those K-12 Illinois and Iowa superintendents whose school districts had a designated rural NCES locale code.

Survey Instrument

All potential respondents (435 K-12 rural superintendents with 200 from Illinois and 235 from Iowa) were invited to complete an online Google survey that included four demographic questions and 35 factual district data questions. There were three additional research questions that asked for the superintendent's thoughts as to their future in the superintendency, the success of their fall of 2020 return-to-learn plan, and district morale for which the findings are not reported in this paper.

Response Rates & Demographic Statistics

There was a respondent return rate of 22.3%, with the majority of survey completers from both Illinois (75.8%) and Iowa (71.4%) being males. This is not surprising as the majority of superintendents in each state is male as reported in each state's public school directory. In Illinois, the majority of survey completers served in school districts with enrollments of 1 to 999 students (98.4%) and there was a tie in terms of the number of years of total superintendent experience with 25.8% having 2 to 5 years of experience and 25.8% having 6 to 10 years of experience. In Iowa, the majority of survey completers served in school districts with enrollments of 1 to 999 students (60%) and the majority of respondents (34.3%) had 2 to 5 years total of superintendent experience. Table 3 summarizes the demographics of survey respondents.

Table 3: *Rural Respondents by State and Demographics*

Demographic Trait	Illinois	Iowa
Female respondents	22.60%	28.60%
Male respondents	75.80%	71.40%
Declined to respond	01.60%	00.00%
1-999 student enrollment	98.40%	60.00%
1000-4999 student enrollment	00.00%	40.00%
5000-9999 student enrollment	01.60%	00.00%
First year as a superintendent	12.90%	08.60%
2-5 years of experience as a superintendent	25.80%	34.30%
6-10 years of experience as a superintendent	25.80%	28.60%
11-15 years of experience as a superintendent	19.40%	14.30%
16+ years of experience as a superintendent	16.10%	14.30%

Descriptive Statistics and Results

The descriptive statistics and results for each of the study's research questions are provided below by research question.

Question One: Statistics and Analysis

The first research question focused on the impact that the top-down state mandates had on educational curriculum that could be offered during the 2020-2021 school year and it asked, "How did state mandates impact curricular offerings?"

Using the NCES codes, there were 62 respondents representing rural districts from Illinois and 35 from Iowa. In both states, respondents indicated that they struggled to offer courses in the "other" survey category; specifically, 53 of the 62 (85.4%) in Illinois and 28 of the 35 (80%) in Iowa. In a review of the respective state's mandated units of study/general accreditation standards, "other" most likely referred to courses related to safety education and computer literacy at the K-8 level, career exploration at the middle school/junior high level, and CPR at the high school level (Illinois Instructional Mandates, 2022; Iowa General Accreditation Standards, 2022). Additional possible "other" categories may have included bilingual education, computer science, special education, and courses known as "exploratory" that are often a part of the middle school/junior high program of study. Exploratory courses are not a part of the accreditation standards of either state but are common for upper elementary or middle grades. One major difference between the states was that Illinois encouraged districts to prioritize standards by disseminating a document in August 2020 to support their efforts (Illinois State Board of Education, 2020d). The goal was to help districts maximize learning and help students recover from the learning impact of the pandemic (p.4). In addition to being unable to offer courses in the "other" category, another 8.1% of respondents in Illinois cited the inability to offer courses in the fine/visual arts and career and technical education. In Iowa, an additional 3 rural districts (8.6%) indicated they could not offer courses in the fine/visual arts.

As an additional point of interest, regarding rurality as a primary focus of this research and specifically in reference to the inability to offer courses in any noted academic category, 61 of the 62 respondents (98.4%) in Illinois and 21 of the 35 respondents from Iowa (60%) were from districts with a population of 1-999. Districts with populations of less than 1,000 are often the most geographically remote rural districts, having a smaller number of staff. During the early months of the pandemic, such districts found themselves stretched thin and only able to offer a skeletal curriculum, thereby having to cut out any course that was not considered a "core course" or critical for their students.

Question Two: Statistics and Analysis

The second research question was related to the delivery of the curriculum offered and investigated "How was the curriculum delivered at the start of the 2020-2021 school year?"

As both states prepared to return-to learn for the 2020-21 school year, both governors issued mandates regarding learning. Illinois Governor Pritzker issued an executive order specifying that all schools "could open" for "limited in-person instruction" (Illinois Executive Order Number 2020-40), and Iowa Governor Reynolds ordered schools to take all efforts to resume in-person learning with at least 50% of all core classes being offered in person (Duffy, 2020). Under the

given parameters and guidance, both Illinois and Iowa schools opened their doors to learning in the fall of 2020. Of the 62 respondents in Illinois, 19 districts (30.6%) selected face-to-face with adjustments and 34 districts (54.8%) opted for a blended/hybrid form of learning. As per the learning recommendations document that guided districts as they planned to return to learn, blended was defined as “combining some aspects of in-person learning with some aspects of remote learning to meet the unique needs of their students” (Illinois State Board of Education, 2020c, p. 27). To align with the Iowa Governor’s directive, 20 (57.1%) rural districts started the school year using face-to-face learning with adjustments made to the learning environment as needed. Adjustments included those laid out by the Departments of Education and Public Health in a uniform document disseminated in the latter part of July (Iowa Department of Education & Iowa Department of Public Health, 2020). An additional 11 districts (31.4%) started the school year in a blended/hybrid format. Because of the governor’s mandate, the likely scenario for this option was that students reported to school for core academics and were allowed some flexibility with taking their electives or exploratory online or virtual. Finally, in Illinois, 4 rural districts started the new school year offering courses totally remote with synchronous learning interludes, and 5 started the year with an alternative schedule of sorts (14.5%). In Iowa, a total of 3 rural districts entered the new school year offering courses completely face-to-face with no adjustments made to the learning environment and 1 district implemented an alternative schedule (11.4%). Looking at the relationship between enrollment and selected instructional delivery method, all those 53 districts in Illinois had enrollments of 1-999, and in Iowa, 20 of the 31 districts (64.5%) had enrollment of 1-999.

Further, to support a district’s return-to-learn plan for the two primary designated instructional methods noted previously (face-to-face with adjustments and blended/hybrid), survey questions explored the need to hire additional personnel, specifically substitute teachers, paraprofessionals, and technology support. Undoubtedly, both states hired additional staff in each of these areas. The primary question base was the following: As a result of the pandemic, how many additional staff did your district need to employ to support student learning. Table 4 reflects the specifics.

Table 4: *Additional Specific Hires Needed to Support District Return-to-Learn Plans*

Additional Hire	Illinois		Iowa	
Substitute Teachers	0	(20 districts)	0	(14 districts)
	1-5	(32 districts)	1-5	(16 districts)
	6-10	(0 districts)	6-10	(0 districts)
	11-19	(1 district)	11-19	(1 district)
	20+	(0 districts)	20+	(0 districts)
Paraprofessionals	0	(24 districts)	0	(12 districts)
	1-5	(22 districts)	1-5	(17 districts)
	6-10	(2 districts)	6-10	(1 district)
	11-19	(5 districts)	11-19	(0 districts)
	20+	(0 districts)	20+	(1 district)
Technology Support	0	(30 districts)	0	(27 districts)
	1-5	(8 districts)	1-5	(4 districts)
	6-10	(0 districts)	6-10	(0 districts)
	11-19	(0 districts)	11-19	(0 districts)
	20+	(0 districts)	20+	(0 districts)

Question Three: Statistics and Analysis

This question asked superintendents to address the quantity of professional development (PD) provided to instructional staff at the start of the 2020-21 school year if their district delivered any content remotely. With the respective state educational mandates issued by both governors, there was room for remote instructional delivery under certain circumstances, and, based on the events from the prior spring with the closing of educational institutions and the need to deliver instruction remotely, this question attempted to derive any insight that would promote an element of instructional preparation for teachers regarding the online/remote population. The question asked superintendents to report such effort in the following increments: 0 hours, up to 4 hours, up to 8 hours, 9+ hours.

First, in a review of the data, it became clear that Illinois provided more hours of PD for instructional staff than did Iowa. Of the 62 respondents from Illinois, 59 (95.2%) provided at least 1 hour of PD to instructional staff, whereas in Iowa, 28 (80.0%) of the 35 respondents provided such support. The table below parses out the data into further detail regarding the overall PD provided to instructional staff regarding remote learning.

Table 5 : PD Regarding Remote Learning: Hours to Start the 2020-21 School Year

Illinois		Iowa	
No remote learning (2 districts)	3.2%	No remote learning (6 districts)	17.1%
0 hours (1 district)	1.6%	0 hours (1 district)	2.9%
Up to 4 hours (15 districts)	24.2%	Up to 4 hours (5 districts)	14.3%
Up to 8 hours (18 districts)	29.0%	Up to 8 hours (9 districts)	25.7%
9+ hours (26 districts)	41.9%	9+ hours (14 districts)	40.0%

Noteworthy is the number of district respondents who indicated they provided at least 9 hours of PD to support their instructional staff in the delivery of remote learning to start the new academic year. What we don't know from this data is whether the PD focused on the support on the remote learning that was occurring as districts returned to learn or if some of the PD was in preparation in case districts were faced with moving to remote learning in a way that mirrored the previous spring. Also noteworthy is that of the 62 districts in Illinois that provided at least 1 hour of PD, 61 of those districts had an enrollment of less than 1,000. In Iowa, of the 28 districts that provided at least 1 hour of PD, 60.7% of those had enrollments of less than 1,000. Finally, in looking at PD provided to districts based on the two primary learning plans employed, Illinois provided the most PD with 54.8% (34 of the 62 districts) to support instruction in the blended/hybrid model with 25.8% (16 of the 62 districts) providing PD to support face-to-face learning with adjustments while those percentages in Iowa were 80% with 16 of 20 districts providing PD hours to support face-to-face learning with adjustments and 90.9% (10 of the 11 districts) providing PD support focused on the blended/hybrid learning model. What could be inferred from the PD data is that district respondents prioritized support for remote learning, either as the new academic year began or in anticipation of the possibility of having to go fully remote again.

Further Discussion

The purpose of this non-experimental quantitative comparative study was to investigate the educational reality of curriculum offerings, delivery, and educator preparedness for remote learning that occurred during the 2020-2021 school year in the two rural neighboring Midwestern states of Illinois and Iowa. This was essential to examine as each state was issued very different mandates from their state leadership and further discussion is offered below.

Why Some Curriculum was not Offered

Research has consistently shown there is a shortage of teachers in the United States which has intensified in recent years and that has disproportionately affected rural communities and the curriculum their school districts can provide (Latterman & Steffes, 2017). In 2020, some of the teacher shortage areas in Illinois included special education, foreign language, and computer science (White & Withee, 2020), with Iowa having these same shortage areas (Szabo, 2022). While it is true there are fewer candidates entering teaching, it appears that the pandemic may have also contributed greatly to the teacher shortage in both states. Andrews and Marzano (2021) share that 2020 data from the Illinois Teacher Retirement System indicate that over 6000 Illinois positions were unfilled and there was a 50% increase in retirements. In addition, an Illinois Education Association survey done in November of 2020 reported that 12% of teacher respondents do not want to be a teacher anymore, with one justification being the resulting ‘burnout’ from added work responsibilities that included having to prepare for both in-class and remote learning (Tietz, 2020). In Iowa, since 2020, the number of teachers planning to leave the field has doubled to 55% due to burnout and the effects of the pandemic (Reichardt, 2022).

While certain curricular area teacher shortages existed pre-pandemic, there are additional potential reasons as to why a curricular area may not have been offered during it. One obvious reason is the mandate for social distancing and some curricular areas (such as career and technical education and physical education) do not easily lend for the application of skills learned when socially distancing. Also, those teachers who could not teach in their areas of expertise (for safety’s sake) were often assigned other duties, such as being a second set of eyes in the classroom or helping other teachers.

Curriculum Delivery and Political Unrest

As the COVID-19 pandemic began in March of 2020 and continued to endure throughout the 2020-2021 school year, the delivery of education in both Illinois and Iowa was ever-evolving due to changing mandates for masking requirements, quarantines and closures. While the study findings indicate the majority of rural districts in Illinois and Iowa complied with their state appropriate mandates, there was still some resulting political unrest that had the potential to interrupt delivery of the curriculum.

District boards of education in both states had to determine if they were going to comply with state mandates. In Illinois, the Red Hill School District chose not to and was put on probation by the Illinois State Board of Education who believed that the district was exhibiting deficiencies that presented a health hazard or a danger to students or staff (Bishop, 2021); they were threatened with closure if they chose not to comply during or after their probationary time period.. In Iowa,

the Des Moines School District chose not to comply with the governor's ban against masks, eventually taking it to court and winning their case (Coltrain, 2021).

In both states there were parents who were extremely vocal and active pertaining to their school district's model of curriculum delivery. There were teachers who feared for their health and safety if curriculum delivery was fully in-person and there were others who were extremely stressed at having to deliver a curriculum in a technological way that they had never before used. Some teachers found themselves having to plan and prepare lessons that were both technologically and in-person based. In some Illinois school districts curriculum delivery had to constantly shift modes from hybrid to full asynchronous, depending upon the quarantine status among school staff (personal communication, Grzanich).

Preparedness for Delivering a Technology-Based Curriculum

March of 2020 triggered an overnight shift to online learning for Illinois schools and many were not prepared. This lack of preparedness was illustrated by the lack of educator professional development on remote learning and hybrid course creation, as well as a lack of access for students to technology hardware, software, internet hotspots, and appropriate internet bandwidth and speed. To address this, some Illinois districts such as Belleville Township High School District 201 parked four of their Wi-Fi equipped buses to serve as Wi-Fi hotspots, strategically parking them in the community where people could just pull up and download the information they needed for the day (Gaines, 2020). Other school districts purchased and loaned out technology to families while some cities partnered with their school districts to provide hotspots to students who needed Internet access at home during the pandemic (Schoenburg, 2020).

While the majority of Iowa rural superintendents responded that they implemented a face-to-face curriculum delivery model with some adjustments as their return-to-learn plan, 40% of them shared that they had provided 9+ hours of professional development on remote learning. The purpose for providing this amount might be for supporting teachers to be able to implement any "needed adjustments" for that face-to-face return-to-learn plan.

On August 7, 2020, Iowa's governor and the IDoE announced funding for the 2020-2021 school year that was to be used primarily for Iowa's 327 school districts and nonpublic schools to increase internet connectivity for use in telelearning, telework, and telehealth (Office of the Governor, 2020). This is indicative of a need for faster and more reliable internet in service in Iowa's schools, and the lack thereof before this announcement may have influenced the delivery of the curriculum for Iowa students to be mostly face-to-face (with some adjustments).

Conclusion

The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) in the United States notes that the last major world-wide pandemic pre-COVID-19 was the 1918 influenza pandemic. Similarities between the two include the facts that there was no vaccination or antibiotics first available, strategies for its mitigation included isolation, quarantine, good personal hygiene, use of disinfectants, and limitations of public gatherings (Centers for Disease Control, n.d.). The world learned from this 1918 pandemic and when it found itself in the same type of pandemic situation in 2020, these same mitigation strategies were immediately implemented.

But by 2020, the education that students received was drastically different from that received in 1918. Nearly a whole century had passed and with each decade, school district responsibilities continued to increase academically as well as socially and health-wise (Vollmer, 2012). Nicola, Gable, & Ash (2020) point out “The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the critical role that schools play in the lives of the students they serve” (p. 1). To that end, what lessons should school districts have learned from the recent COVID-19 pandemic pertaining to their critical role?

School Districts Must Be Prepared for the Next Pandemic

While school districts have created plans for managing all types of crises, there was no plan for delivering student curriculum during a pandemic. Districts must create a plan to address this as there will be another pandemic given the continuing multitude of variants that are mutating from the original COVID-19 virus.

As a part of their plan, they may want to offer and communicate when the varied learning options available for students will occur as a result of fluctuating state health metrics and quarantine closures. For example, the Vail School District in Arizona did this and communicated their varied learning options to parents. At different times they offered an in-person option, a full-time real time online option, a full-time self-paced online option, and a micro school that supported home-school students (Prothero, 2021).

Any form of remote learning requires access to updated devices and stable internet (Nicola, Gable, & Ash, 2020). A lack of funding in rural districts means that many students may not have regular access to updated or any technological devices, as well as needed internet bandwidth and speed (Bailey, 2018). To address this, districts can look to partner with all types of organizations and with other authorities such as city officials and technology companies (Battenfeld, 2020).

Learning remotely also requires professional development for teachers that keeps them up-to-date in remote curriculum delivery. Because technology-based instruction is ever-evolving, a school district may look to partner with local colleges/universities or other districts to provide professional development. If the district has funding available, it may consider hiring their own or sharing a curriculum/technology strategist. If a district needs to find funds, superintendents should consider the use of zero-based budgeting where they are developing a new budget from scratch every time that is based on the organization's mission and values (Future Ready Schools, n.d.) as opposed to just incrementally increasing each line item.

The Importance of Rurality and this Study's Results

Whitener and McGranahan (n. d.) contend that today's youth, no matter where they live, will need an unprecedented level of education and technical skills for an increasingly high-skilled economy. To achieve this, K-12 Illinois and Iowa students who attend rural districts must have a consistently offered curriculum and access to the technology needed while all K-12 teachers must be provided with the proactive professional development to deliver that technology-based curriculum.

The findings reported in this study are from rural Illinois and Iowa K-12 district superintendents. Due to the use of purposive sampling, these findings are generalizable to the rural K-12 Illinois and Iowa superintendents who did not take part in the study (Andrade, 2021).

The importance of the findings cannot be emphasized enough as school district superintendents are frequently given all of the blame or criticism for a “bad situation”, often being referred to as

“the lightning rod” of a district. The findings and understandings from this study will hopefully help them in future pandemic-based “lightning rod” situations by providing: 1) a reference point as to how varying mandated state policies in pandemic times can potentially impact student achievement through the curriculum that is able to be offered and its mode of delivery; 2) proactive steps that they can take now for preparedness and future readiness; and 3) a contribution to the literature regarding an uninterrupted curriculum delivery for K-12 rural students during a world-wide pandemic.

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Being in “Their House”: Impact of Youth Participatory Action Research on Adult Learning at a Rural High School

Anita Chikkatur

Abstract

This article examines the impact on the adult facilitator of a Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) team at a rural high school in the Midwest. By focusing on the learning trajectory of the adult facilitator and emphasizing the youth's pedagogical and inspirational roles, it illuminates the potential impacts of YPAR on adults in a school context, a topic not yet thoroughly examined in research on YPAR. If the goal is to ensure that schools are supportive spaces for all youth, it is imperative that adults in schools learn from the young people they work with. This article argues that engaging with students through YPAR can be one way to facilitate transformative change and growth for adults in school settings, including in rural locations.

Keywords: *Youth Participatory Action Research, rural high schools, transformative school change, youth empowerment*

Hi, Brian. Yesterday as an icebreaker activity, the student research team were answering a few questions, including "Who do you admire in your community?" One of the students said that they admired you and a bunch of the other students agreed: "Yeah, he's cool." Thought you'd like to know!
(Email correspondence, December 4, 2019)¹

This article examines the impact on the adult facilitator of a Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) team at a rural high school in the Midwest. Previous literature has documented the important impacts of YPAR on youth well-being, academic performance, sense of belonging, and empowerment, including at rural schools (Anyon et al., 2018; Caraballo et al., 2017; Carson Baggett & Andrzejewski, 2017; Means et al., 2021). Building on this research, I focus specifically on the learning trajectory of the adult facilitator, emphasizing the youth's pedagogical and inspirational roles. YPAR projects, particularly with youth of color who are often marginalized in their school contexts, are often implemented with the goal of changing those contexts, a goal that depends on the willingness of adults to value youth insight and knowledge (Bertrand & Lozenski, 2021). This article illuminates the potential impacts of YPAR on adults in a school context, a topic

1. Because this study is based on a federally funded participatory action research project with publicly available information, the institutions and the people involved will be named. The author has informed consent from the adult facilitator (Brian) to use his real name in the article.

not yet thoroughly examined in research on YPAR. If the goal is to ensure that schools are supportive spaces for all youth, it is imperative that adults in schools learn from the young people they work with. This article argues that engaging with students through YPAR can facilitate transformative change and growth for adults in school settings, including in rural locations.

This article draws on the experiences of a biracial/Black² school counselor, Brian, who acted as a facilitator for a YPAR team at a rural high school in Minnesota during the 2020-2021 school year. The YPAR team was part of a four-year federally funded participatory action research (PAR) project in Faribault, MN (2019-2022).³ Consisting of Somali and Latinx high school students, the YPAR team was one of several community research teams supported by the grant who used various methods over the grant period to investigate why Somali and Latinx students were not graduating at the same rates as their white peers from the high school. As the facilitator's experiences illuminate, engaging in YPAR can provide a structured way for adults to learn from student knowledge and expertise, especially if they are open to being transformed by their involvement. Such perspective-shifting can be especially important in rural schools where teachers and other school staff remain predominantly white, even as student bodies are becoming more racially and ethnically diverse, as was the case in the town where this study took place. The facilitator's experiences also suggest that working with young people in this capacity can also be a source of support for staff of color in rural schools, as they negotiate the realities of being one of few adults or the only adult of color in a school.

Literature Review

Participatory Action Research (PAR) is a framework for conducting research and generating knowledge centered on the belief that those who are most impacted by research should be the ones taking the lead in framing the questions, the design, the methods, and the modes of analysis of such research projects. The framework is rooted in the belief that there is value in both traditionally recognized knowledge, such as scholarship generated by university-based researchers, and historically de-legitimized knowledge, such as knowledge generated within marginalized communities (Torre, 2009). The PAR project in Faribault aimed to bring together college faculty who have expertise in PAR theory and methods, college staff who have expertise in civic engagement, and community members who have personal and professional expertise in their lived context. The concerns and interests of community members fundamentally shaped the “appropriate questions, research design, methods and analysis as well as useful research products” (Torre, 2009, p. 1) Centering the experiences and expertise of community members is important in generating useful and relevant solutions in all settings, including in rural communities.

Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) is one type of Participatory Action Research (PAR) that centers “young people in identifying problems relevant to their own lives, conducting research to understand the problems, and advocating for changes based on research evidence”

2. Terms to describe individuals and communities are always changing and limited in their inclusionary intent. I use the terms that individuals used to describe themselves and the terms most often used in the community and grant work. I will also use other terms when quoting sources and data from the school district, state, and the U.S. Census Bureau as applicable. I have also chosen to *not* capitalize “white” (unless I’m quoting a source), though I acknowledge that these decisions about capitalization are complicated ones (Appaiah, 2020; Laws, 2020).

3. This article is based on a participatory action research project in Faribault, MN, funded by AmeriCorps under Grant No. 18REHMN001 through the Community Conversations research grant competition. Opinions or points of view expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official position of, or a position that is endorsed by, AmeriCorps.

(Ozer, 2016, p. 190). One important goal and outcome of YPAR projects is to reframe deficit narratives of youth and to position youth as “capable of generating expert knowledge of value in understanding and addressing problems that affect their development and well-being” (Ozer, 2016, p. 191). For example, YPAR curricula explicitly ask youth to identify personal, group, and community assets. For young people of color or otherwise historically marginalized young people, YPAR can be a way “to experience self-determination, social justice, and empowerment” (Ballon-off Suleiman et al., 2019, p. 27). Means et al. (2021) note that YPAR can be one way to “invite rural youth to collaborate with school administrators, educators, and community leaders” to both identify challenges and needs *and* assets and strengths in their community (p. 43).

A meta-review examining outcomes for youth participating in YPAR noted that several studies reported that youth increased their leadership skills and sense of agency, especially youth of color. However, YPAR programs set in schools were *less* likely to report these outcomes (Anyon et al., 2018). This finding suggests that youth might face more difficulty in seeing themselves and/or being seen as experts in schools because of schools’ hierarchical power structures (Anyon et al., 2018). While there are many ways to ensure that youth voice and insights are embedded into rural schools, including setting up a youth advisory board (Means et al., 2021), structural changes in who makes decisions and how depend on the willingness of adults to implement such changes. Bertrand and Lozenski (2021) argue that often the youth expect that “sympathetic and/or inspired adults with decision-making authority will take up [their] recommendations and translate them into policy or practice” (p. 3) but such changes do not often occur. They posit that appeals to the morality of adults in powerful positions are unfortunately not enough to overcome “the tenacity of powerful people and entities to maintain the status quo” (p. 8).

The experience of facilitating a YPAR team, rather than merely listening to a team present, could be a catalyst for transforming adult perspectives. In most contexts, YPAR groups are facilitated by adults who act as “facilitator, observer, and reporter of the participant group” and who support the youth by “building participants’ confidence and independence by listening to and validating their inputs” (Mathikithela & Wood, 2019, p. 79). YPAR projects can provide an opportunity for youth and their adult allies to “collectively address, question, theorize, and take action against social and institutional injustice” (Scorza et al., 2017, p. 139). While several studies have made clear the benefits of YPAR for youth, working with youth in this capacity also presents an important learning opportunity for adults. As a group of adult facilitators note:

When we began engaging in YPAR, we had some understanding of the pedagogical roles that adults would need to play to help youth become powerful researchers and advocates for change. We were wholly unprepared, however, for the ways that students would use YPAR as a pedagogical tool to impact adults and youth alike. (Scorza et al., 2017, p. 139)

This quote points to a central premise of YPAR, and PAR in general, that the knowledge and perspectives of all those involved in the research process are valuable. Studies examining the impact of YPAR projects then need to consider the impact of YPAR on the adults involved as well as on the youth involved. This article focuses on the transformative potential of YPAR on the adult facilitators’ view of youth as experts and of themselves as agents of change.

Context for the YPAR Team at Faribault High School

In October 2018, Carleton College, in collaboration with Faribault Public Schools, Somali Community Resettlement Services, and Community without Borders, received a grant from AmeriCorps to design and implement a participatory action research (PAR) project (*Carleton-Faribault PAR Collaboration*, n.d.). Faribault is located in Rice Country, Minnesota, and has a population of approximately 23,000. According to data from the Minnesota Department of Education (*Minnesota Report Card*, n.d.), in the 2009-2010 school year, 19% of the students in Faribault were identified as Latinx and 6.68% were identified as Black. By the 2020-2021 school year, 28% of the students were identified as Latinx and 26% as Black or African American. At the high school, approximately 20% of the students are identified as Latinx and 20% are identified as Black (*Minnesota Report Card*, n.d.), with a majority of the “Black” population in Faribault being identified as African immigrants/refugees—primarily from Somalia (Hirsi, 2018).

This rapid change in student demographics in less than a decade has not led to parallel changes in the teaching force in Faribault. In the region that includes the Faribault School District, the numbers of African American and Hispanic teachers remain low despite increases from 2000 to 2014, with just 23 African American teachers and 12 Hispanic teachers out of a total teacher pool of 5,327 in 2014 (“Teacher supply and demand”, 2015). This reflects a statewide challenge: of approximately 58,000 teachers in Minnesota in 2014, just 594 were African American (1%) and 521 were Hispanic (1%) (“Teacher supply and demand”, 2015). A 2019 report did not find much improvement in increasing teacher diversity, with only 0.9% of teachers in the region being identified as teachers of color (Wilder, 2019). Nationally, teachers of color make up 11% of the teacher population in rural schools (Geiger, 2018).

Like other small, rural towns adjusting to such changes in the racial and ethnic make-up of their communities (*Racial and Ethnic Diversity Is Increasing in Rural America*, n.d.), Faribault has been facing challenges in terms of ensuring that all students complete high school and pursue higher education. In 2018, the overall high school graduation rate for the Faribault School District was approximately 68%; while 82% of white students graduated, only 41% of Black and Hispanic students did so (*Minnesota Report Card*, n.d.). These low graduation rates for Latinx and Somali students were the primary reason for why community members wanted to get involved with the participatory action research (PAR) project.

The PAR project’s main objective was to understand the experiences of three different stakeholder groups at Faribault High School: Latinx and Somali high school students, their parents, and the white teachers who work with those students. The project sought to have the stakeholder groups define, explore, and understand both the challenges they face and the assets they possess, in order to move away from deficit-focused understandings and solutions while maintaining a focus on the documented disparities in racial minority students’ educational experiences and outcomes. For example, in 2019 when the PAR project started, while approximately 89% of white students graduated from the high school in Faribault, only 53% of their Hispanic/Latino and 43% of Black/African American peers graduated from high school. In 2019, the four-year high school graduation rate for English Language Learners, most of whom were Somali or Latinx, was 16% (*Minnesota Report Card*, n.d.).

Faribault’s rural setting made this work of bringing together young people, their families, and their parents both more challenging and easier compared to doing similar work in larger, urban areas. The “New Latino Diaspora” (NLD) describes the phenomenon starting in the 1990s where Latinx migrants moved into rural and semi-rural areas of the country where previously there were

not substantial numbers of Latinx residents (Wortham et al., 2002). Scholars studying such places have written about both the possibilities within and challenges faced by communities who have not been as accustomed to supporting immigrant/refugee youth and families. While the “newness” of different racial and ethnic communities does present challenges such as the lack of existing resources catering to a more diverse population (for example, established English as Second language programs or availability of qualified translators and interpreters), these “new” locations might also “allow more flexible and sometimes more hopeful immigrant identities” because negative and racist stereotypes about immigrant cultures are not as entrenched there compared to areas with long-term Latino settlement (Wortham et al., 2009, p. 389). The smaller, rural setting of Faribault also meant that all young people in the town attend the same schools because there is, for example, only one public middle school and high school. Administrators were often invested in improving outcomes for students of color because this had important implications for the overall well-being and reputation of the school district and town.

Composition of the YPAR Team (2020-2021)

While there was a YPAR team at the high school during the first and second years of the larger PAR project in Faribault (2018-19 and 2019-20), the youth team’s work during the second year was interrupted by the onset of the COVID pandemic in the spring of 2020. In the summer of 2020, when the project funding was renewed for a third year, the two co-principal investigators (co-PIs), Anita Chikkatur (author) and Emily Oliver, for the grant at Carleton College approached Brian Coleman, the career and equity counselor at the high school, about being the facilitator for the YPAR team in the 2020-2021 school year. As indicated by the email quoted at the beginning of the article, Brian had been identified by many of the students on the 2019-2020 YPAR team as a trusted adult in their school and community. Brian agreed to facilitate the team with the support of the two co-PIs. Because of pandemic-related restrictions, my co-PI and I could not meet with Brian or the students in person.

In initial discussions with Brian, my co-PI and I stressed the need to have students on the YPAR team with a range of academic experiences and from a range of grade levels. We wanted to make sure that participation in the YPAR team did not end up reinforcing academic hierarchies. Brian used his existing relationships with students and staff to recruit eight students, two of whom had been on the previous YPAR teams. Four of the students identified as Somali, three identified as Mexican/Mexican American, and one student as Dominican. The team included students in 9th through 12th grades. While the goal was to recruit and enroll students who were English Language Learners, Brian was unable to do so, despite several attempts. By January 2021, the team began its work after obtaining parental permission for them to participate in the team. While the YPAR teams had met after school during the first and second years of the project, the team decided to meet on Wednesday afternoons during the school day. The hybrid schedule for the school during 2020-2021 facilitated this option; while Wednesdays were designated as an “online learning day” for all students, students had the option of coming to the school to do their work. Finding time for YPAR teams to meet during the school day often becomes a barrier (Caraballo et al., 2017) and, in this case, the hybrid schedule, necessitated by the pandemic, ended up removing this particular barrier. Brian facilitated these meetings, using a curriculum he co-developed with the two co-PIs.

Data Sources and Methodology

This article draws primarily on an inductive thematic analysis of two main sources of data: a formal interview conducted with the adult facilitator, Brian, by the author in October 2021, and notes from planning and debrief meetings⁴ with Brian and the two grant co-PIs during the 2020-2021 school year. The article's analysis is also informed by the work that the author did in collaboration with the various PAR teams in Faribault over the four years of the grant.

Findings

The Impact of Facilitator Positionality and Perspectives

Brian describes himself as a biracial male who grew up in a lower middle-class family in Michigan and as always having a passion for getting involved with and advocating for underserved communities. He was first hired in the Faribault School District as a Service Learning Coordinator. He worked with K-12 students for four years to coordinate service learning projects in the town. At the time he decided to take on the role of facilitator for the YPAR team, Brian had been working as the Career and Equity Coordinator at the high school for two years. He supported students in deciding on their paths after high school and coordinated internships and apprenticeship opportunities. He also had been asked to be the advisor for the newly formed Black Student Union at the school. Brian was the only counselor of color and one of very few staff of color at the high school. Nationwide, approximately 10% of school counselors are Black/African American and 5% are Latinx (American School Counselor Association, 2021).

As a staff member of color, Brian saw many similarities between his experiences and those of the youth of color on the YPAR team. For example, in an initial planning meeting, Brian noted that students of color sometimes think that no adult “gets it” but that “little do they know that you have been trained your whole life to be aware. I had the same gut feelings as a youth but you don’t have the courage or the support to express [that]. You’d be labeled as having a bad attitude” (meeting notes, December 4, 2020). In the interview, Brian talked about his identity and experiences as a staff of color being key to the kind of relationship he was able to build with the YPAR team members. He explained, “I think it mattered for sure that...it was a staff of color that was facilitating. I think it mattered for them. It mattered for me” (interview, October 2021). Later in the conversation, Brian spoke about how some of the powerlessness his students felt as youth was reflected in his position as a staff member, especially a staff member of color. He talked about how teachers and administrators at the high school would not always take his analysis of a situation seriously because he was “just the career guy.” He noted that this dynamic seemed “similar...like [how] students felt disempowered because they would bring these things up and nothing would happen...and as [a] staff and like as a counselor, you didn’t have a lot of power, either, right?” The YPAR space became a place for Brian to discuss his positionality within the school, leading the students to understand that “as a staff of color, you have a lot of weight on your shoulders.” Given the reality of having so few teachers and staff of color at rural schools, being able to facilitate

4 . Most of these meeting notes were taken by Emily Oliver, the co-PI for the AmeriCorps grant from September 2019 to September 2021.

YPAR teams in rural schools with all or a majority of students of color might provide a supportive space for adults of color as well as for students of color.

This connection Brian had with the YPAR team members and with youth of color at the school more broadly became poignantly important at one point in the school year—when 20-year-old Duante Wright was shot and killed during a traffic stop in Brooklyn Center, a Minnesota suburb about an hour away from Faribault (Sullivan, 2021). During a meeting a few days after the killing, Brian expressed how it had been an exhausting week for him, with numerous meetings at the school about Wright’s murder and about the protests that followed his death. Brian talked about how Wright’s death “hits a little different” because Wright was so close in age to the high school students. He told us, “When you are the only person of color in the school, those students all come to you. While I can comfort them, I can’t tell them it will be different for them.” He shared a story about when he noticed his car’s brake lights were out and he went during the school day to get it fixed. When a white colleague teased him about taking time out during a workday to do so, Brian had to explain why it was important that he did that—he did not want to give a police officer any excuse to pull him over, leading to a potentially deadly interaction (meeting notes, April 15, 2021). This example points to the shared set of experiences, both negative and positive, that enhanced Brian’s ability to connect with and support the youth of color on the YPAR team. This moment also speaks to why it is so important for rural schools to make more of a commitment and concerted effort to recruit and retain teachers and staff of color. Brian’s ability to be there for his students of color was influenced by his own experiences of racism and the kind of preparation that he took to try and minimize the number of potentially harmful racist encounters.

While it is definitely possible and important for white teachers to be supportive allies to their students of color (Emdin, 2017), the experiences of staff of color with racism allows for an affirmation of student realities in ways that are hard to replicate in a school setting with few or no adults of color. Research studies have found that white teachers often do connect more easily with their white students. For example, Bettie’s (2014) research on a group of white and Latinx high school students in California found that teachers often formed friendlier relationships with students who are “like” them—white and middle-class. Similarly, Lee’s (2005) ethnography of Hmong American students at a Wisconsin high school notes that the “good” students at her site were the ones who were on “friendly terms with faculty and staff...They [could] engage in witty banter with teachers and administrators inside and outside of school” (p. 28). These kinds of interactions with teachers required a certain level of fluency in English and with mainstream white culture that not all students had access to. White teachers can and should listen to and affirm the experiences of their students of color (Kivel, 2002). However, when students of color feel differently included and welcomed when there are adults of color in the school who have had to negotiate the same racial stressors as them, such as racial profiling and police brutality, are familiar with their familial and cultural practices, and/or speak their home language fluently.

Learning from Youth

As noted earlier, much of the analysis of YPAR projects’ outcomes focuses on what young people gain from the experience and the benefits for youth, especially youth of color and other marginalized youth, of participating in such work. For example, Sprague Martinez et al. (2020) note that engaging in YPAR provides professional development opportunities for youth; increases their sociopolitical skills and motivation to get involved in their schools and communities; and provides opportunities for youth “to be at the table” (p. 703). As noted earlier, however, being “at

the table” does not guarantee that youth expertise and perspective will be taken into serious consideration by those with power at those tables. At Faribault, for example, Brian noted that there was some concern among teachers that “equity work might ‘get out of hand’ to the point that they can’t control it” (meeting notes, January 15, 2021). The teachers’ concerns speak to why it is often difficult for young people on YPAR teams to see any substantial changes based on their research and expertise. Letting go of the need to control the process or the outcomes can be difficult for teachers and other adults in an educational setting. However, as Kumashiro (2002) argues, there is much in the process of teaching and learning that cannot be controlled or even known by teachers, and recognizing and embracing this reality would support teachers to teach in anti-oppressive ways that centers their students’ needs, assets, and knowledge.

Rather than worrying about controlling the YPAR group space as an adult, Brian instead clearly positioned himself as a co-learner. He described how “going into this [project] was a whole learning process for me in relation to research in this way” and while working with students in a group was not new to him, “it was listening to them, you know, in that space, right?... We hear a lot of things that kids say but...we’re not in a space which they’ve considered their space” (interview, October 2021). Facilitating the YPAR team felt different than his counseling experiences because “like, I’m a guest in their house at this point...and they are welcoming me into their environment and I am a learner and a listener.” He noted that usually when he would ask a student how their day was going, a typical answer would be “It’s going alright. It’s going good.” But the YPAR team members often responded with deeper, more honest answers: “But in their house, in their space, they felt like they could let me know how they really felt their day was going, whether it be good or bad” (interview, October 2021). Brian’s choice of language—describing working with the YPAR team as being in “their house”—points to the difference between inviting students to a “table” built by adults and adults going to a space that students have created for and by themselves. Later in the conversation, Brian noted how teachers often think, “I’m the teacher here. This is my classroom, so I’m taking ownership right away” and he wondered how teaching and learning might look different if teachers instead saw the classroom as a shared space of reciprocal learning, a place of co-learning.

Facilitating the YPAR team gave Brian an opportunity to “have the students be teachers” (interview, October 2021). He noted several times during the interview that this kind of space reinforced to him that students “don’t get enough credit for their knowledge that they bring, the experiences that they bring and what they see and how they see the world.” Co-creating a space where students were open and honest meant that he “was able to just sit back and really kind of be a sponge at times because the information that they were sharing, it was deep.” However, as Kumashiro (2002) notes, more knowledge does not necessarily lead to empathy nor does it always lead to changing one’s ideas or behaviors. What was important in Brian’s case was that his deep listening to student perspectives actually led to changes in how he viewed and understood certain dynamics in the school. For example, some of the YPAR team members who were academic “high flyers” complained to Brian about being tokenized by their teachers and the administrators. They did not like being told that “more students need to be like you” because everyone is an individual (interview, October 2021). Brian noted that after that conversation, he started noticing how when teachers or administrators chose students of color to give an announcement or be featured in a story or video about the school, the same few students were chosen.

Brian’s conversations with the YPAR team also made him more aware of certain student-teacher dynamics; what looked like a positive interaction between a teacher and a student to him was sometimes a more negative experience for the student because they viewed the teacher as

using a deficit perspective. Brian talked about how learning about that difference in perception made him notice the differences in how teachers sometimes interacted differently with students of color and white students (interview, October 2021). Such awareness, based on what he learned from the students, is crucial for white teachers and administrators in rural schools, given that their experiences in schools are often vastly different than those of their students of color. Additionally, the fact that Brian, even as a man of color, did not often see what was happening speaks to the importance of such deep listening for all teachers and staff in order to look beyond their own limited perspectives and to analyze the school setting from their students' perspectives.

In addition to shifting how he viewed the school setting, Brian noted that the insights and perspectives of the YPAR team members impacted how he interacted with his children. He realized that

I need to listen to them as well and hear what they have to say because they are being affected. They should have a voice and if I teach my kids at this age to do that, then, hopefully it's gonna carry forward through their life to be able to speak when they need to...and not be afraid to have any option. (interview, October 2021)

This new understanding of how to approach conversations and interactions with young people, whether at work or home, has meant he no longer “rushes into conversations” and tries to be conscious of taking the time to ask for and listen to young people’s opinions and perspectives. Brian’s willingness to learn from the young people from YPAR and to apply these lessons not only to his professional life but also to his personal life speak volumes about the importance he placed on the transformative power of listening to youth and on the possibility for collective learning in a YPAR space. These kinds of transformative and collective learning experiences are necessary to achieve a main goal of YPAR projects in school settings: changing practices and policies to ensure a more supportive learning environment for all students.

Limitations of Individual-Level Change

This case study, however, also speaks to limitations of systemic and sustained changes through the implementation of just one program or through the efforts of one individual, especially if this person has little power within a hierarchical structure. Brian noted that once he became more aware of troubling dynamics between white teachers and students of color, for example, he would follow up with administrators to see what could be done to change such dynamics. However, even when administrators would agree with the students’ and Brian’s assessment of a situation, Brian noted that he started to “lose faith...[that] it’s going to be handled appropriately...or at least addressed”(interview, October 2021). Like the youth on the YPAR team, Brian also felt a sense of powerlessness in being able to push for change. He noted that the few staff of color at the school were guarded about what they shared at meetings, even when they were invited to speak “their truth” because “our truth will offend people, right?” (interview, October 2021). At the end of the school year, Brian decided to leave Faribault; based on the lack of support he felt he received as a Black staff member, he had no compelling reason to stay. Sustaining the work of change in rural schools can be difficult if those who are most capable and most willing to work differently with students are not supported by their colleagues and supervisors.

Brian’s decision to leave also speaks to the nationwide trends in teacher of color turnover rates in schools. Teachers of color leave at a higher rate than white teachers and they often cite the working conditions of their schools as a reason for leaving (*The State of Teacher Diversity in American Education*, 2015). A Minnesota-focused report found that teachers of color were more

willing to stay in their jobs if they had opportunities to build respectful relationships with students, had the autonomy to influence the broader school culture, and felt respected for their perspectives and knowledge (Vitrella, 2019). If recruiting and retaining a diverse staff is a priority for rural schools, then they need to find ways to support their teachers and staff of color by providing them with opportunities to work closely with youth of color (including by facilitating YPAR teams) and by continuing to listen when they might be speaking truths that may go against the status quo and make others uncomfortable. For Brian, working with the YPAR team gave him a space to be more fully himself as a person of color and to bring in his racialized experiences a way to connect with and affirm youth. Providing a space for colleagues of color and students of color to build solidarity with one another can be helpful for all involved in rural spaces that feel lonely and unwelcoming for young people *and* adults of color.

Conclusions

This in-depth case study of what one adult facilitator learned from his experiences of working with a YPAR team in a rural high school setting speaks to the potential of YPAR's impact on adult learning. While this case study is specific in its contextual details and PAR projects are, by design, focused on “what happens here, in this single case--not what goes on anywhere or everywhere” (McTaggart et al , 2017, p. 28), there are important lessons to be learned from Brian's approach to facilitating the YPAR team at Faribault High School: the importance of creating a collaborative learning space that students come to feel is *their* space; the willingness of adults to let themselves be transformed through deep listening and letting go of the idea of control; and the capacity and willingness of white adults to listen to the uncomfortable truths shared by their students and staff of color. This kind of learning experience for adults is particularly important in rural areas where the student populations are becoming racially and ethnically diverse more rapidly than the population of teachers and staff. While there are important efforts underway in Minnesota to increase the number of teachers of color (*Legislation*, 2022; Velazco, 2021), it will take time for the educator population to be as diverse as the student population in rural areas. Additionally, *all* teachers and staff members, white and of color, benefit from taking seriously the knowledge and insights of young people of color and their communities. Using YPAR principles more broadly in schools and classrooms can create the conditions for more equitable collaborations in rural schools between the mostly white staff and students of color where youth of color, their caregivers, and their communities as viewed as an important “source of expertise and leadership for achieving educational equity and justice” (Ishimaru, 2020, p. 4). Such collaborations are key to building rural classrooms and schools that nurture all students' interests, insights, and imaginations.

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Centering the Lived Experiences of Rural Black Homeschool Families

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Abstract

Compared to all other options, homeschooling provides parents with the most control over their children’s educational experiences. The COVID-19 pandemic led to a surge in the U.S. homeschool population. Black families had the largest increase in home educators from 3.3% to 16.1% between April 2020 and October 2020. The emerging literature on Black home education has focused almost entirely on urban areas. This paper presents findings from a pilot study designed to begin to address the omission of rural setting representation in Black home education research literature. This qualitative study employed conceptual frameworks that value Black women’s ways of knowing (e.g., Black Feminist Theory, Endarkened Feminist Epistemologies, and Critical Race Theory) to emphasize the role of participating mothers who represented a single-parent household or a household where the mother maintained primary responsibility for the home education of children.

Keywords: *homeschooling, African American/Black families, rural education, culturally relevant methodology*

Compared to all other options, homeschooling provides parents with the most control over their children’s educational experiences. The COVID-19 pandemic led to a surge in the U.S. homeschool population, and Black families had the largest increase in homeschooling from 3.3% to 16.1% between April 2020 and October 2020 (Eggleston & Fields, 2021). An emerging body of research has begun to document the contemporary Black homeschooling movement, but these studies have focused on urban areas. The phenomenon of rural Black home education has remained largely ignored, and therefore, rural Black families’ perspectives have been relatively absent from the literature. Swain and Baker (2021) asserted, “There are very few media representations of people of color in rural southern United States, and those that exist are positioned as exceptions. We speculate this may in part be due to the historical construction of white land ownership of First Nation lands, settler colonialism, and the enslavement of Black bodies”, (p. 16). The continued marginalization of rural Black families’ representation in the literature may lead to inequity as state legislatures revisit and revise educational policies, particularly in response to the rise in homeschooling. This paper presents findings from a pilot study designed to begin to address the omission of rural setting representation in Black home education research literature.

Review of Relevant Literature

There is a dearth of comprehensive examinations of Black rural homeschooling. Most examinations of Black rural homeschooling are included as minor mentions in larger studies of

homeschooling (Jennings & Feagin, 2019; Levy, 2009; Ray et.al, 2021). Or studies of Black homeschooling are urban focused (Fields-Smith & Kisura, 2013; Mazama, 2016; King, 2016; Taylor, 2018). When conducting the search for relevant literature for this study it was found that overall examinations of homeschooling in the rural context are limited. This finding was very intriguing especially because the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) 2019 study states that most homeschooling families are in the South and live in rural places (Wang, Rathbun, Musu, 2019). Despite this being the case Bridgeforth et al. (2021) study on school choice identified homeschooling as a form of school choice that is consistently selected, yet only four studies examine “rural education and homeschooling” (p.3) (see. Grady & Hoffman, 2018; Lubienski, Puckett, Brewer, 2013; Ray, 2015; Schafer & Khan, 2017). The studies noted by Bridgeforth et. al (2021) are not specific to examinations of Black rural homeschooling, yet with a limited scope of general discussions of rural homeschooling, Black families are even more so left out of this conversation.

Black Homeschooling

Studies of Black families who homeschool are most commonly localized in an urban context. One study related to Black families who homeschool was conducted by Ray (2015). The study titled “African American homeschool parents’ motivations for homeschooling and their black children’s academic achievement” employed an exploratory, cross-sectional, explanatory non-experimental design. Summarily Ray found that Black homeschooled students had higher academic achievement outcomes than their same aged, public school peers. While this study has many limitations in its quantitative approach to this subject, it also does not explicitly include locale so there is no disaggregation of data by setting (e.g., rural, urban, or suburban). Mazama & Lundy (2015) specifically examine the motivation of Black families to homeschool and denote a paucity of research on this topic. Understanding the motivation explicit to Black families is important in understanding the overall landscape of homeschooling and its implication for educational policy and practice. Mazama and Lundy articulate dynamic reasons for Black homeschooling that are more specific to navigating a racially oppressive society, yet there is no mention of a rural context for the examination. Moreover, Taylor (2018) plainly takes up an analysis of Black women’s homeschooling experiences and in doing so names

“Thus, in spite of the growing interests in homeschoolers and the proliferation of research on education and race, the tangential and often one-dimensional inclusion of Black homeschoolers’ participation distorts the breadth of sociopolitical and cultural experiences within homeschooling research while concurrently perpetuating monolithic characterizations of Black family life” (p.215).

Taylor’s (2018) examination provides a clear articulation of why examining the specificity of the experiences of Black rural homeschoolers adds to the literature in very important ways by disrupting what Taylor calls a “monolithic characterization” of Black homeschool life. Even so Taylor’s analysis does not expressly address rural as a context for Black homeschooling.

Fields-Smith and many co-authors have examined Black families and their homeschooling experiences. Fields-Smith’s (2020) study discussed how Black family homeschooling is a form of resistance, and development of their children’s positive cultural self-identities. Fields-Smith & Kisura (2013) documented the ways Black homeschool families engaged their children in learning, and how having this knowledge informs the needs of Black education in public schools as

well. Fields-Smith & Williams (2009) found that Black parents' motivations to homeschool included issues related to race relation, and issues with the home and school relationship. Furthermore, they found that while Black parents had religious beliefs that motivated them to homeschool those motivations were more liberatory than their Caucasian home educating counterparts. Ultimately, much of Fields-Smith work has been seminal in building the examinations of Black families homeschooling experiences. Yet it distinctly lacks an examination of rural areas. Identifying the gap in the general literature has contributed to the justification for this current study.

Black Rural Homeschooling

There are limited instances where Black families are included in the research study related to rural places. Jennings & Feagin (2019) reviewed the book *Chocolate Cities: The Black Map of American Life* by Hunter and Robinson (2018) and used their methodological and theoretical innovation to examine Black homeschooling as a form of Black sociological liberation. In doing so Jennings & Feagin (2019) made themselves one of the few studies that include rural in their language when discussing Black families who homeschool. Ultimately Jennings and Feagin posited the "African American homeschooling movement is an even sterner critique of the US state's systemic and institutional racism" (p.435). This inclusion of analysis of racism is instructive to understanding the landscape of Black families in rural places who homeschool. Levy (2009) explicitly discussed *Homeschooling and Racism* from the title it is clear Levy is explicit with their discussion of racism. Levy's study concludes "a correlation between racism and the geotemporal diffusion of homeschooling legislation" (p. 905). Levy employed an event history analysis of the occurrence of US states adopting homeschooling legislation. Levy tied this event history to state levels of school segregation. Levy also denoted "Homeschooling families are more likely to live in small towns or rural areas. These figures therefore suggest that states that are less urban are more likely to have a higher percentage of homeschooling families" (p. 907). Even with these conclusions Levy's study is more focused on the segregation tactics of white supremacy than the explicit choice of Black families in rural places to homeschool.

Overall, the examination of the literature showed that most families who homeschool live in the South and in rural places (Wang, Rathbun, Musu, 2019), however based on the educational research one would think that a majority of homeschoolers are in urban places. From this review of the literature, we concluded there is a gap in literature on Black families in rural places who homeschool, even though most homeschooling families live in the rural places. Identifying this gap in the literature provides an opportunity to focus on the growing homeschool population with a specificity aimed toward understanding the experiences of rural and Black as it relates to homeschooling.

Conceptual Framework

This qualitative study aimed to implement a culturally responsive and anti-colonial methodological approach by employing conceptual frameworks that value Black women's ways of knowing because, based on the existing research, Black mothers tend to oversee and conduct the instruction within Black homeschool families. To this end, our research has been informed by an overlapping of Black Feminist Theory (Collins, 2009), Critical Race Theory (Ladson-Billings, 2005), and Endarkened Feminist Epistemologies (Dillard, 2007). In selecting these frameworks, we do not disparage the role of Black fathers in homeschooling. Instead, we emphasize the role of

the mothers in this study who were either represented as a single-parent household or a household where the mother maintained primary responsibility for the home education of children.

Black Feminist Thought (BFT)

We conceptualize Black home education as an extension of hooks' (1990) conception of 'homeplace', which provided a historical perspective of the role Black mothers played in the lives of their children during the Jim Crow Era. To prepare their children to face the anti-Blackness, racism, and hate outside of their homes, hooks explained,

In our young minds houses belonged to women, were their special domain, not as property, but as places where all that truly mattered in life took place - the warmth and comfort of shelter, the feeding of our bodies, the nurturing of our souls. There we learned dignity, integrity of being; there we learned to have faith. The folks who made this life possible, who were our primary guides and teachers, were Black women.

During Segregation, Black mothers' homes became spaces of resistance against the brutality of racism, and today, Black mothers similarly have created sites of resistance through their implementation of home education. While we are no longer segregated by force under law, today's Black home educators choose this path for a wide variety of reasons including a need to avoid and overcome the many challenges facing Black education within traditional schools, public and private. Most notably, today's Black home educators resist institutionalized anti-Blackness experienced within and outside of traditional schools, the resegregation of schools, the under-resourcing of predominantly ethnic-minority schools, and they find refuge for their children through home-schooling. BFT requires researchers to value the lived experiences and 'everyday knowledge' of those who have directly experienced the phenomenon under study, which for this study includes the intersectionality of being a Black mother, living in a rural community, and choosing home education for your children. Who would better understand the challenges, consequences, and possibilities of this combination of potentially oppressive characteristics than the Black mothers living this life? Using BFT provides insight and knowledge well beyond statistics.

Regarding resistance, Collins' seminal work in *Black Feminist Thought* (2009) explained that while most Black women experience racism, sexism, or other forms of oppression, we respond to it differently. Likewise, Black home educators have myriad approaches to their home education practice. Employing Black Feminist Thought to this study enables us to seek and document this diversity within the lived experiences of Black home educators rather than using a positivistic approach, which tends to value commonalities or centrality of the data. This is critical to our study, which focuses on the intersectionality of being Black, living in rural spaces, and choosing to home-school. Moreover, applying BFT to our study enables Black home educators to engage in self-naming. As the participating mothers described their rural communities, we remained open to their definitions of rural even if they conflicted with other participants' descriptions. Therefore, BFT promotes acknowledgement of the unique perspectives each Black home educator contributed to the study and honors the fact that Black rural homeschool families are not a monolith. Finally, BFT fosters a social justice stance in research by seeking opportunities to inform transformation of inequities and eradication of oppression in policy and practice. Therefore, this study aimed to address deficit thinking surrounding Black mothers', their children, and their families as well as stereotypes and myths related to rural living and Black home education.

Critical Race Theory (CRT)

Most academics know that CRT originated in the legal field by the late scholar, Derrick Bell, but has been applied to other fields/institutions, including education, through research. Ladson-Billings (1999) most notably illuminated the role of African American storytelling as a key feature of CRT in education while also linking the history of CRT beyond Derrick Bell. The social construction of race serves as a major tenet of CRT along with the acknowledgement of the predominance of whiteness as a measurement or norm for ‘correctness’ within U.S. institutions including our educational system, and white privilege overall. Black storytelling in research counters the deficit perspective view that tends to permeate the discourse on Black parents and their children within the field of education. Counternarratives enable Black families to speak the truths of their socially constructed realities, and they can hopefully encourage diverse perspective taking, empathy, and compassion. Further, engaging in storytelling provides Black parents with a vehicle to counter self-hate and move toward healing from the oppression/hate/Anti-Blackness experienced within and outside of schools.

This study creates a space for Black mothers who homeschool in rural communities to speak their truths, which have been omitted from the literature until now. The continued absence of Black rural home educators falsely communicates that Black home education is an urban only phenomenon. Further, Black rurally situated homeschool families’ lived experiences challenges deficit thinking associated with rurality, Blackness, and the learning potential of Black children.

Endarkened Feminist Epistemology (EFE)

Dillard’s (2006) concept of Endarkened Feminist Epistemology (EFE) connects to and expands BFT and CRT by grounding our research in Black women’s ways of knowing, and by honoring ancestral, community, and spiritual connections. Her work undergirds the purpose and process of this study. The power of self-naming, recognized by BFT, CRT, and EFE, has been embodied in the way this study defines ‘rural’ through the lens of the Black home educators represented within this study. Like the Black women in Dillard (2006), the Black home educators defined ‘rural’ in a variety of ways, which at times conflicted with traditional definitions, but also offered insight toward understanding more fully the complexity of labeling a place rural or not rural. The purpose of this study can be explained through EFE as Dillard posited “To give voice to silenced spaces as an act of resistance” (p. 19). Whether their communities would be labeled ‘rural’ or not did not matter for this work. That each home educator self-identified as a rural dweller enabled them to participate in the study. Our methods also embodied the EFE assumption that the distinct daily experiences of each home educator “form the criteria of meaning”, and therefore, the methodology of this study not only valued rural Black home educators’ everyday experiences, but also created a sense of responsibility ‘to get it right’ not only among the researcher, but also within the group of participating rural Black home educators. Our connection to one another held us accountable to each other. This is the spirituality of the research process described by Dillard (2006), which was accomplished through member checks and Sister Circle Methodology, to be discussed in the next section.

Methodology

This qualitative pilot study assumed a phenomenological stance seeking to understand the phenomena of homeschooling from the perspective of Black homeschool mothers living in rural communities, including their self-definitions of the rural context. We further sought to employ culturally responsive and anti-colonial research strategies to privilege the voices of participating Black rural homeschool mothers. Blending phenomenological, culturally responsive, and decolonizing research methods enabled us to be responsive to the inquiry focus of this study while also maintaining a responsiveness to the participants. Patel (2016) reminds scholars that research is never neutral and to foster change researchers need to shift from seeking to “own” data/knowledge to instead cultivate a mindset of researchers as accountable to their study participants. Research accountability, or answerability promotes a focus on the varied/unique perspectives and lived experiences of Black home educators in rural spaces rather than narrowly aiming for convergence.

Participants

Using the community nomination process, where each participant referred another person to participate in this study, resulted in 12 rural Black home educator participants. Participating Black homeschool mothers did not know other Black homeschool families in their own rural communities and instead relied on internet-based relationships to refer other home educators to participate in the study, which serves as an indication of the isolation of rural Black homeschooling to be discussed in the findings section. As a result of this isolation, the 12 participating home educators represented eight different states (Alabama, Arkansas, California, Georgia, Louisiana, Tennessee, Texas, North Carolina). Due to the isolation of participating Black home educators we limit the uniquely identifiable characteristics of their rural communities and use pseudonyms to protect their anonymity. The diverse homeschool families represented in this study chose to remove their children from either 1) public schools (Brenda, Cherie, Christy, Nichelle, Nina, Tracey, and Kim), 2) private schools (Annaliese, Kim, Mickey), or chose to homeschool from birth (Kiki). Candy and Janette indicated strong intentions to transition to homeschool soon, but they represented part-time home educators meaning that they engaged in homeschooling while their children also attended public schools.

As found on Table 1 below, the 12 rural home educators represented in this study included two single parent families (Brenda & Christy) and five of the mothers had grown up as natives of their rural communities while seven of them had been transplanted from other states and cities. Five of the seven transplants had lived in large urban metropolitan cities such as Chicago, Illinois or Baltimore, Maryland. Mothers ranged in having homeschooled for a year up to over 24 years. Three home educators were veterans having homeschooled for 10 or more years, while five of the mothers had relatively new homeschool practices of between 1-3 years. Candy and Janette, part-time home educators, had high hopes of transitioning to full-time homeschooling as soon as possible. Candy’s barrier to homeschooling resided in the fact that she and her family were living with her parents and her parents did not want her to homeschool her children. Once she secured housing independent of her parents she and her husband planned to begin home educating their children. Janette had not yet transitioned to homeschooling because she was developing a plan to begin her home education practice while also maintaining her full-time job. She and some friends were in the process of developing and mapping out the homeschool curriculum they would use as part of

that plan. Contrary to common stereotypes of homeschool families, six of the home educators in this study held full-time jobs outside of their homes, four of the mothers were entrepreneurs, one mom worked part-time outside of the home and also ran her own business and only two of the home educators were stay-at-home mothers. Further, all of the mothers in this study had at least one degree; six of the home educators held professional or doctoral degrees and four had master's degrees.

Table 1: *Participating Black Home Educators' Demographics*

Home Educator (State)	Marital Status M=Married S = Single	# Years Home-schooling	# Children (Ages)	Native or Transplant	Education	Work Status
Annaliese (GA)	M	4 years	1 son (9)	T	Law School	Full-time
Brenda (NC)	S	2 years	daughter & son (Twins, 6)	T	Ph.D.	Full-time
Candy (NC)	M	Part-time Home Educator	2 daughters (10, 5)	N	Masters	Ent
Cherie (AL)	M	3 years	1 son (6)	N	Masters	Ent
Christy (TN)	S	2 years	1 son (13)	N	Masters	Ent
Janette (NC)	M	Part-time Home Educator	2 sons (10, 8)	N	Ph.D.	Full-time
Kim (LA)	M	8 years	2 sons (18,16)	T	Undergrad	Home

KiKi (GA)	M	24+ years	3 sons (23, 21, 14) daughter (19)	T	Ph.D.	Full-time
Mickey (GA)	M	1 year	2 sons (14, 6)	T	Ph.D.	Full-time
Nichelle (TX)	M	10+ years	3 daughters (15, 13, 11) 2 sons (8, 4)	T	Masters	Ent + Part-time
Nina (CA)	M	11+ years	2 sons (19, 21) Daughter (10)	N	Under grad	Home
Tracey (AR)	M	2 years	2 daughters (14, 12)	T	Ph.D.	Full-time

Data Sources and Research Process

Interviews and Sister Circles served as the primary data collection methods used in this study. In this section we describe the data collection and data analysis processes which were intertwined with strategies to ensure trustworthiness of data interpretation.

Interviews

Due to COVID-19 pandemic travel restrictions, interviews were conducted over Zoom. Interview protocols sought a conversation style rather than an interrogation and followed a modified version of Seidman’s (2013) multi-phased interview process. The three stages of the interviews began with a review of the consent form and then transitioned to homeschool mothers’ definitions of rural. The semi-structured guide included gathering background information on where participating home educators grew up and how they came to live in their current rural communities. Finally, Black home educators were asked to share their perspectives on the strengths and challenges of homeschooling in rural communities.

Each interview was recorded and transcribed verbatim via a transcription service. Interview transcripts were compared to Zoom recordings for accuracy and formatting, and then they were sent to the participants for member checks. We honored participating home educator mothers’ requests to remove items from the transcript. In addition, children’s names, schools, and other setting identifying details have been removed. Overall, interviews lasted for between 60 to 90 minutes. Transcripts averaged 55 pages in length and ranged from 37 to 129 pages.

Data analysis began with interview transcripts employing initial coding deductively gleaned directly from the research questions. These general codes served as somewhat of a “grand

tour”, or overview, within exploratory coding as discussed in Saldana (2016, p. 73) and they included definitions of rural, challenges of rural homeschooling, benefits of rural homeschooling, and the role of race in rural homeschooling. Matrices were created to explore the unique attributes among each home educator within each of these initial codes. This second level of analysis led to deeper understanding of emerging themes such as how Black homeschool mothers experienced isolation beyond basic spatial/geographic isolation. The findings presented in this paper represent the results of this second level of analysis.

Sister Circles

Sister Circles have been used within the African American community for over 100 years; they began when Black women were not welcomed in historical White women and Black male spaces (Johnson, 2015). Out of necessity, Black women created Sister Circles to collectively share, encourage, strategize, and move toward healing from oppression. Sister Circles have been used in the counseling and health professions, and more recently have begun to be applied to educational research. Sister Circles represent a culturally responsive method of engaging in focus groups with Black women (Hall, 2020).

Johnson (2015) identified three primary characteristics of Sister Circle methodology, which were applied to this study as well. First, the researcher assumes the role of participant by sharing experiences. The aim is to remove the power dynamic. Second, Sister Circle methodology promotes empowerment for all participants. “Having opportunities to connect and share with other Black women further helps Black women to make meaning of those experiences, or knowledge, (Lacy, 2018)”. Indeed, participating rural Black home educators remarked on the value of meeting and sharing with other Black homeschool mothers who lived in rural communities, which represented a rare opportunity for them given their relative isolation. Finally, Sister Circle communication styles do not typically follow the conventions of standard English, but instead privilege the African American vernacular and style. It is not unusual to hear members of a Sister Circle talking over each other, shouts of “Amen”, and other culturally relevant ways of expressing connection or passion over a subject being discussed. These expressions communicate encouragement to each other, rather than rudeness. In this study, Sister Circles served as a strategy toward clarifying and verifying initial interpretations of the interview data. Therefore, Sister Circles were scheduled after completion of interviews, transcription, and the initial stages of data analysis.

Sister Circles typically occur in-person and even over a meal. However, due to the pandemic the Sister Circles for this study were recorded via Zoom, which required extra care. To cultivate collectiveness, the first author planned three Sister Circles each with four rural Black home educators. Hall (2020) suggested keeping the number of sisters in the circle small to ensure all voices would be heard. Where possible, mothers from the same state were scheduled in a Sister Circle together. The invitation to participate in a Sister Circle included a description of the event as an opportunity to meet and share with other Black mothers who homeschool in rural communities. Prior to each scheduled Sister Circle, the first author emailed participating mothers with suggestions to be in a comfortable and relaxed space for the Zoom Sister Circle and to have a warm beverage and snacks nearby. Further, rural home educators were encouraged to keep their cameras on, but also provided with the option of keeping them off. In addition, home educators were reminded to change their name in Zoom if they wanted to remain anonymous. Only 1 home educator used a pseudonym, but after the circle she asked that her email be shared with the other participants. Sister Circles began with a welcome and thank you given by the first author, a reminder of

the focus on “What is it like to be Black and homeschool in a rural community?”, and introduction of each group member. The first author provided circle members with an overview of key themes in the interview data such as isolation and complexity of defining “rural”. Sister Circles ended by asking home educators to share about how they experienced the circle.

Overall, the methodological design of this pilot study complimented our aim for a culturally responsive, decolonizing, and systematic rigorous research process. Each Sister Circle contained elements of joy, laughter, and bonding. Members of the circle reached out to one another and formed ongoing relationships.

Findings

With an aim of centering rural Black homeschool mothers’ lived experiences, this study addressed the following questions:

1. How do rural, Black mothers define and know they live in rural spaces?
2. How do rural, Black mothers discuss the role of race in their homeschool decision-making, homeschool practice, or everyday living?

We present the findings in two main sections titled, Black Home Educators’ Definitions and Perspectives of Rural and How Does Race Show Up in the Data? Overall, we found that rural does not mean an absence of resources, rural spaces are quite different from one another, and Black families can thrive in rural homeschool contexts.

Black Home Educators’ Definitions and Perspectives of Rural

The twelve participating Black home educators used familiar idioms or characterizations to initially describe their rural communities. Rural home educators used common phrases such as “I’m in the sticks” (GA), “the middle of nowhere” (NC), and even “Nobody knows where we are” (TX) to begin describing their rural communities. Idioms were used by rural transplants and natives of rural communities alike. These phrases implied rural referred to remote, lesser-known areas within a state. In describing their rural communities, Black home educators tended to compare them by distance from larger, assumed more known cities (e.g., ‘about 60 miles east of _____’ or ‘two hours away from _____’). Other characteristics of rural raised among most participants included 1) living a lengthy distance from their nearest neighbor, 2) ability to count total number of traffic lights in the community, and 3) identifying the limited existence of, or proximity to, popular franchises (e.g. fast food chains, supermarkets, and department stores). Black home educators also frequently described what they observed surrounding their homes as they looked out from their windows or porches, which included wildlife, agricultural products growing in large fields (commercial farming), wilderness, or large open spaces of land. Rural Black home educators also reported owning/living on several acres of land. In fact, access to land and agriculture served as a key asset for rural Black home educators.

Significance of the Land

Rural Black home educators reported strong connections between the land (owned by them and surrounding them) to their curriculum, home education practice, and transmission of values

and life lessons to their children. Interestingly, both rural natives and transplants expressed experiencing these connections.

Kiki, a veteran home educator who grew up in a large urban city in the North, who but now lived in Georgia shared,

So, part of homeschooling rural black kids is helping them understand the value of land. *We wanted their education to be something that had this kind of continuity to our ancestors...* like your ability to grow your own food and eat your own food, right? What I'm trying to get at really is if black families could create and understand the beauty of land and have a positive connection, maybe that would help to balance out some of the ancestral experiences that were so bad and traumatic. *Own- ing land is liberation.* We rent out some of our land now and that was so different from what our ancestors had. That's power- that's freedom. That's freedom. *When you're rural and you're homeschooling, I think it creates this relationship to land. But, um, it's funny because when they feel the need to be free, they come home, you know, they come back to the land. They come back where it's quiet, where they can just be who they are, back to that identity that they've crafted for themselves.*

Kiki connects land ownership with freedom and African American ancestral history. Possessing the land enabled her family to enjoy financial gain from renting portions of their land to others who also farmed. Most importantly, Kiki relates her family's relationship with land to freedom, and even her children's identity development. The serenity of her rural community enabled her children to have a place where they could just be, which is reminiscent of Peters' (2020) cogent argument linking Black homeschooling to the constitutional right to privacy, or 'the freedom to be or become'. The author explained that legal definitions of privacy, which included 1) an "individual's ability to live a self-authored and self-curated life without unnecessary intrusions and distractions" (p. 26) and as breathing room referring to "the space created for play and self-making, both key to innovation and a vigilant citizenry" (p. 29) have not been explored deeply enough in relation to racial discrimination. She stated,

Black people's experience with the right to privacy has been inconsistent at best. Black children are disproportionately denied the experience and attendant benefits of child privacy. Foregrounding the essential meaning of privacy as *the right to be and become in childhood* allows for a more nuanced examination of child privacy and the necessary protection of the developing psyche. Exposure to privacy violations cause immense damage with far reaching consequences. While parents have a duty to protect their children, Black parents carry the additional burden of identifying and protecting their children from the predictable harms of racial discrimination. (Peters, 2020, p. 30, emphasis in the original)

The author continues with a detailed discussion of the implications of Black children's racialized experiences with continued deficit-thinking and the lingering myth of Black inferiority. Given the hardships racialized experiences within schools, and outside of schools, Peters conceptualized Black homeschool parents as protecting their children's privacy or "their children's' right to be and become by adhering to a series of practices that include preserving Black childhood; creating breathing space for Black children to flourish, insulating Black children from distortions; and letting Black children self-author their own lives" (p. 43). Thus, Kiki's adult children returning to the

breathing space offered by their childhood rural homeschool environment represents a vehicle toward privacy, or “the right to be and become”.

Like Kiki’s children, other rural Black homeschool mothers described participation in 4-H Club or 4-H-like activities within their rural communities. 4-H Club is a youth development organization tied to the U.S. Department of Agriculture engages youths in leadership and Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math hands-on activities centered on agriculture-related topics. Nina who homeschooled in a rural California community talked about integrating her home garden and care of chickens as well as bees into her homeschool practice. She shared, “We’re getting to where all the afternoons are going to be outside in the garden and she [daughter] can’t wait to just be outside”. Nina described how they learned to protect the chickens from the hawks and caring for plants when they were young as part of their extensively agriculturally based homeschool practice. For Christy, a native of her rural community, connection to land meant connections with elders in her family. She shared, “*My dad and grand dad would always have gardens, and sometimes you go to the grocery store, what you want ain’t there. Okay, how are we going to solve that? Well, we got an old country remedy for that. Get a bucket, let’s start a garden. It doesn’t have to be a plot of land. You can grow some stuff in your house! You know, just being resourceful, trying to rely on the land, um, get into, you know, get to your elders because they still do live in those parts. Get those stories about your history and know who you are... learn how to live off the land, but also learn from the people who lived off the land before you.*” However, growing produce and raising animals at home did not work out for everyone. Kim, a transplant in her rural Louisiana community, shared,

The thing is when we moved out here the boys weren’t in anything, and, you know, activities really, and my husband, he swears he’s a farmer. He is not a farmer. He thinks he is, but he is not. When we first moved out here, we got a goat. I had no idea. We shouldn’t have been getting a goat. *The goat ran away, never saw the goat again. Um, we tried chickens. We tried to plant things, and nothing ever worked (laughs). So, we had no business doing it.*

Black rural home educators held diverse perspectives in their connections to the land and relating agriculturally based content into their curriculum ranging from intense to infertile attempts to engage in farming.

Similarly, Black rural homeschool mothers represented in this study demonstrated the diversity within rural communities. Three mothers described living in subdivision-like communities similar to suburbs where their neighbors’ homes were relatively close. Although rural communities appeared to be remote, some Black rural mothers reported that their communities had a variety of valuable resources such as an abundance of STEM related industries, nearby beaches, or proximity to multiple state lines. Nonetheless, each of the Black home educators expressed feelings of isolation within their rural communities.

Isolation

Analysis revealed three types of isolation experienced by rural Black homeschool mothers to varying degrees. First, geographic isolation, which Levy (2009) also found as stated, “Because rural communities usually experience spatial isolation, transportation of rural students to a regional public school may not be a viable solution. In addition, the culture of social isolation where small

communities rely on their own resources for a living can also contribute to the evolution of home-schooling" (p. 913). In fact, Annaliese used geographic isolation to explain why she perceived her community as rural. She stated,

I understand, you know, it's [her community] a decent size, you know, maybe 100,000 or so, give or take, right. But to me, that's pretty small, having come from the DC metro area, where some of the suburban communities right around the DC city proper can exceed, you know, several 100,000s of people. Right. So that, to me, is suburban. And this to me, is rural, also partly, so not just because it's a small college town for a land grant institution out in the middle of the country. Right. *But it's also, you know, 70 plus miles or so from Atlanta, which to me is a true urban city area. To get here you go through a lot of really small towns and countryside and cotton fields and farms. Right. So, components of rural. That's why I think of this as rural.*

As a transplanted rural dweller, Annaliese viewed her community as rural due to its size in comparison to the large urban metropolitan area she grew up in. But distance from the resources found in a large urban area served as a key challenge in Annaliese's homeschooling as well as the quality of resources found in her community compared to those found in large urban areas. She shared,

I mean there is [a local community park] with a bear and some other animals there but you know, it's not the same as going to the zoo in Atlanta or the aquarium. So, I think those types of extra killer or enrichment opportunities don't exist here. *So, you must make the right arrangements to be able to go, you have to find the time to go, you have to pay the fees, you have to, you know, get there at the appointed time. And so that can be a barrier, right?* You know, even putting those aside, but you don't maybe have the same range of bookstores or toy stores, or the sort of the commercial venues to choose from.

Black rural home educators expressed having to travel long distances has one of their main challenges. Nichelle, who homeschooled in Texas, reported traveling up to three hours one way to gain access to resources to enhance her homeschool practice. But Nichelle's decision to travel two hours included a desire to enable her children to socialize with other Black homeschool children as they were the only Black family who homeschooled in her rural community. In this way, some Black rural homeschool mothers experience cultural isolation as they search for co-ops and other opportunities to interact with other Black families. Nichelle described urban areas as being plentiful in terms of ethnic-minority-focused homeschool groups. She and her children will make a day of it and travel the three hours one way to participate in a field trip with an urban-based ethnic-minority homeschool group. This topic will be further explored in the next section of findings.

Political isolation represented the final form of isolation experienced by rural Black home educators. Interestingly, this theme initially emerged from Black home educators' expressions of concerns regarding displaying images that might provoke negative responses from their White neighbors and community. Mickey shared the following, *"So, for us, if I wear my T-shirt that says Black Lives Matter- you can imagine the looks. There are the different looks, the stares, the people who step back. And, and I can tell, you know-people are, um, you know, they intend to let you know that I make them feel uncomfortable...But here I have to monitor, you know, what I wear and maybe even how I wear my hair and those kinds of things."* Such concerns were not limited to

issues surrounding Blackness, or concern for anti-Blackness, but also included political affiliations and even homeschooling more broadly.

Five months following the 2020 presidential election, Nichelle described her rural community experience as “we're kinda walking on eggshells out here”. She further explained,

“The [political] signs are still up; we have flags that are upside down...Like an SOS signal, like something's wrong. That's the hidden language. If you fly it upside down, like “We're not happy”... The distress signal that's what the word I'm looking for”. Amid her neighbors’ silent, but highly visible protest at the election of President Joe Biden, Nichelle reported that her family felt ill at ease in expressing their views, but this discomfort existed prior to the election results. Nichelle shared, “The Confederate signs are all over the place. They're, they're everywhere. before he was in office, I mean, people will look at...Some people look at homeschoolers like... And, and have their judgements. I remember wanting to put a sticker or something on my truck. Like, you know how they, they have the stickers where they have like the mom, father stick figure- it was something similar to that, but it was homeschool something and my husband was like, ‘No, don’t do that because everybody doesn’t agree with that and we don’t want to be targeted for whatever reason...you know, homeschooling in the midst of people who don't necessarily agree with who we are as, like the color of our skin and, um, people who don't necessarily agree with homeschool.”

Interestingly, not all Black home educators in rural communities experienced this type of political isolation. During a Sister Circle discussion, representing southern states acknowledged the presence of confederate flags as well as guns and in response, these homeschool moms revealed that they too visibly engage in gun use for hunting and as a sport, which provided a means of alerting their neighbors that they too are armed. Brenda shared awkward interactions with her rural white community members including an incident in Wal-Mart. She shared,

One time we were at Wal-Mart and this random man came up to us, we were walking into Walmart, and he was coming out...and he was like, “Young man, we stand for the flag, and we kneel at the cross to my five-year-old little boy!” This was of course in reference to Colin Kaepernick, and I was like, What a...And then I think some of these interactions are because I’m a woman. I doubt people would come up and talk to people’s children if a man was with them. I don’t know, but those types of things happen all the time in the community and make me say, ‘Ahh, [this community] may not be the best place to raise and socialize Black children.”

Finally, Black home educators tended to experience sociocultural isolation when they chose to homeschool due to the challenge in finding families who homeschooled who shared their Black identity and focus in the homeschool practice. Annalise described feeling constrained in finding non-religious home educators in her southern rural community, “I recognize that here [our rural community] there are a fair number of religious based homeschoolers and homeschooling programs. But I think if you're, a little bit outside that norm, that model, it can be difficult to find people to connect with, or access to home educators with more diverse perspectives”. The challenge in finding like-minded homeschool families existed within majority Black and predominantly white rural communities because even in the majority Black communities, rural homeschool mothers frequently reported being the only Black family that homeschooled in their community.

How does Race Get Taken Up in this Data?

The following section details the ways that Black home educators discussed race. Which directly responds to the research question: How does race get taken up in this data? Not all participants were as explicit about their use of language that directly addressed race. Participant transcripts were analyzed for the words: Black, African American, and race-facing terms (i.e. white, Asian, mixed). This search for explicit mentions of race was intentional in explicating how race was taken up in the data. Generally, participants were responding to some version of the prompt ...talk about rural homeschooling, um, from a black perspective. The findings from this prompt resulted in three themes: *being the only black*, *black as a descriptor*, and *black representation*. While participant responses varied, there were consistent descriptions of being the only, usually when referring to the structure of the rural locale, or the activities and experiences of the family or the children. Descriptions of being the only often were in relation to discussing learning-based activities or social opportunities for the children. The use of descriptors like “only black people,” “only black family” or “only black family a lot of times” provided clear articulation of the theme of *being the only black*. Each of these forms of being the only was instructive to understanding how race was taken up in the data. Overlapping this theme of being the only is the use of Black as a descriptor, meaning to denote something about the race of the Black educator or family. This particular use seemed common when describing families or individuals of races other than Black, meaning related to families or experiences where there were more than just white persons or families. Lastly, Black as representation was critical to the Black home educator’s descriptions related to race. Points made by the Black home educators included discussion of teachers that are the same race as their child, the need to represent Black people in the curriculum and learning that their child participates in. The way representation was discussed was nuanced and direct, overall Black home educators were reinforcing the importance of the decisions they are making related to educating their Black children at home. The subsequent section provides examples that demonstrate how these themes were expressed in the interviews.

Being the only Black

Representing participants discussion about *being the only black* showed up in several ways. One participant Kiki stated multiple times “... yeah, it just didn't, it didn't mesh. Um, so, so needless to say, *they were always like the only black person in their whatever*” (Kiki, p.39). Kiki discusses this when talking about her children’s choices in activities. When talking about 4H she noted, “Uh, and when we joined, we were... I'm trying to think of, we were *the only black family*, or I know there was never more than two black families, and we were one” (Kiki, p.10). The form of being the only black family was a way that participants expressed their perspective of being a Black family in a rural place who homeschool. “But being in a rural space, I think the challenge becomes is that it's not easily accessible to sorta like go to a tutoring spot or to, um, uh, there's not a, there's *not a black homeschool group that's near us either*” (Tracey, p. 40). Being the only was found across most transcripts yet how it was discussed may have varied. Sometimes it was related to children’s activities, other times it was related to the entire structure of being a Black family who is homeschooling. In one case Kim expressed “... you know, in our, in our rural area, I think *we're the only black people in- in our town*. Okay, maybe some other over but, like, usually in our circles, *we're usually the only black people*” (p.20). Additionally, some expressed it related to the frequency of being the only black “Uh, well, where are the *only black ones a lot of times*. (laughs)”

(Nina, p.7). “I would venture to say the biggest disadvantage of homeschooling or the experiences that we've seen is, um, *being the only black person*. It is the weirdest thing. Um, and not just only a black person homeschooling, but the only black person involved in experiences” (Kiki, p.38). These characterizations of *being the only black* contribute to how we understand how race got taken up in the data. Mothers expressed how *being the only black* impacted their children and their choices about accessing resources and locations for field trips, outings and connecting to others.

Black as Descriptor

Mothers in the study also used Black and or race as a descriptor. This meant that when describing an experience or a situation, the relevance of Black was present and necessary to include. It also showed up when mothers were discussing their experiences with other raced groups. Nichelle spends some time discussing various homeschool groups:

Um, but I know in the more urban areas are the more...Uh, like the, the city, like in Houston, there are tons of homeschool groups, you know, you can pick and choose if want a, *a Black group, if you want a White group, if you want a Muslim group, you know, that you can just kind of pick and choose.* (p. 14)

Brenda likewise describes the ethnic/racial experience of being different, it is inferred that she is talking about different from racially white “*Two of us are African American, the other one is Jewish*. And so that- that was kind of our- our bond and glue, that we were- we were different than what is here” (Brenda, p. 24). In these descriptions both mothers find the need to denote how naming black as a descriptor is important to understand what they are experiencing. Black as descriptor also included denoting who was present in the rural space where the families reside. “Um, there's, there's no...*it's only black and white. There isn't another racial group*” (Tracey, p. 46). This descriptor also related to the age of the children relative to the community that the Black home educators lived in. The rural community, town, city that a Black home educator resides in was a big part of the way they used Black as a descriptor. Tracey related the following when talking about her neighborhood: Um, *We're the only black family with young children though*” (p.47). Additionally, Candy had a similar comment on the race/age dynamic of her location too “Um...And *I haven't met a lot of other black families that have young children*. Like, their kids are a bit older, um- “(p.26). Black home educators' use of black as a descriptor is not surprising as the context of their lived experiences and oftentimes their reasoning for home educating is tied to their identity as Black. The use of Black as a descriptor did however denote not just those that are racially Black but also those of other races too. This theme contributes to answering the research question about how race was taken up in the data through the ways that it includes Black and. Meaning Black as a necessary descriptor to include because there were also other identifying elements too. Meaning race/ethnicity or race/age. Black as a descriptor helped to explicate the nuances of living in a rural place where the need to denote Black helps to make more plain the experiences of Black home educators in rural places.

Black as Representation:

Examinations of the data for how Black home educators took up race included representation, which was discussed related to being in a rural place and opportunities for Black and blackness to be represented. Sometimes that representation was based on others who look like their family, or even most profoundly was related to where black is most or best represented. Annelise's discussion of this provided one of the most profound articulations of representation:

And when we talk specifically about being black, and being a home educator, that also adds another layer. So being black and being in Athens, not even being a home educator, just being black and being [in] Athens has its own rural feel to it for me, compared to other places that I've lived in America, that were not as rural like as here. And then when you overlay the homeschooling part, and you start trying to think about connecting with people finding curriculum, finding activities to fill, *being that far from Africa, I mean, from Atlanta*, is problematic, right, as an African American Home educator. I mean, the *African American Museum is in Atlanta. Right now, [not] many African centered places here in this community.* (Annelise, p.7)

Annelise's phrasing "being that far from Africa, I mean, from Atlanta", this statement when hearing it and reading it was so poignant even though it could be read as a slip of the tongue it also can be read as a way to understand and recognize where Black people and Black representation are located and Atlanta, for her, was that place, as a representation of Africa. Other articulations related to representation also included disrupting negative narrative of Black families.

That's, that is, it's really important because, you know, when you think about, um, *what we hear about black parents, what we hear about black kids, a lot of times, it's not always the positive things that we do. And, and it's more, it seems to me it's more of the negative things. And it continues this narrative of the inferiority of being black.* (Nina, p. 27)

The quote speaks to the need to disrupt how Black peoples are represented negatively and to do that work being a home educator was a way to do that. Janet reiterates this notion when she discusses:

But, you know, I think that the more I've spoken to colleagues that are, that are black women raising black children, um, the more we realize that schooling for our children is simply put on the back. They, they really want... they try to make our children assimilate to the white culture, this cultural whiteness. And I just, I just rather, or *I prefer to teach my own children. Um, because for one I can include history that I know is accurate.* (p. 7)

Representing history accurately was one articulation of the ways that being a Black home educator addressed Black representation. It also names an explicit way that Black home educators are intentionally addressing representation. Another form of representation related to choices about learning interactions

...but, watching the kids online, *the majority are African American. And for the first time in my eighth graders, like he's got black teachers.* And for the first time, well, of course,

my little one is in first grade, but his teacher is a *Black teacher*. And he just loves looking at her, 'cause she has curly long hair." (Mickey p. 15)

When Mickey discusses her children's experience with a Black teacher as a part of their home education learning, she also asserts that having the Black teacher with curly long hair was influential to her child. This teacher represented more than just a person on the other side of the computer screen. Knowing there are others was important, other Black students and having a Black teacher. Furthermore, Nina discusses the same when it comes to her own excitement about finding others that represented Black home education.

Um, you know, since I've been on Instagram, I've like, *I've found so many black home schoolers, but before that, um, I mean, definitely when I was homeschooled, uh, I was the only one that was black*. And, but I mean, when I went to school, that was always, that was the case a lot of times in my classes too." (Nina, p.7)

Having representations of Black people doing homeschooling, engaging home education and being able to make the decisions about how and who your child was interacting with so that Black would not be negatively represented was important to these rural home educators. Black as representation meant making intentional decisions about how and who would help educate their children in ways that are or were not available in their public school settings.

Overall, the Black home educators discussed race in concrete ways with some nuance. What was seen across the 12 transcripts was that being black, using black to describe their experiences and black representation were important and often motivating aspects of their home educating. Being in a rural place and being a Black home educator meant that sometimes the children and the family are the only black people, or that using black as a descriptor was necessary so that the context and understanding of the experience was not lost, and finally it meant that black as representation was a necessary part of the home education experience. Black as representation may have also been a result of the participants' locale. Being in rural places, even if they are mostly in the south, contextually influenced the experiences and responses Black home educators provided. As discussed related to isolation, the proximity to other Black people is influential in the ways that the Black home educators in this study chose to navigate and discuss their home educating experiences.

Discussion

This pilot study focused on the lived experiences of rural Black homeschool mothers has begun to highlight the benefits and barriers of being Black, homeschooling, and living in a rural community. Access to an abundance of land and agriculture represented a major benefit for rural homeschool mothers not just in their curriculum development, but also in providing relative quiet and even a freedom perceived to not be readily available in urban surroundings. The lived experiences expressed by rural Black home educators related to farming align with reports of contemporary Black farming as a form of resistance (Gripper, 2020; Yu, 2018). Gripper discusses the phenomenon of food sovereignty happening in major cities where Black people are regaining "agency and ownership over their food system." By maintaining and owning a source for food through farming Black families reconnect with our ancestral strength who farmed when grocery stores

refused to serve them. Farming builds community and also promotes collective healing. Gripper explained,

Through grassroots organizing, policy advocacy, and urban planning, we are pushing for access to land for emotional, spiritual, physical, and collective healing because our communities' health and livelihoods depend on it. Gardens and farms provide people with exposure to greenness, opportunities for physical activity and potential benefits to the microbiome since exposure to soil and its many microorganisms can boost our gut health.

This activism works to counter Black land loss and to create economic opportunity within the Black community. Rural Black home educators' access to land and agriculture created opportunities for Peters' (2020) notion of privacy or freedom to be and become like what Black urban farmers seek.

The various forms of isolation, (geographic, sociocultural, and political) represented a major challenge for rural Black homeschool mothers. Rural meant being away from other Black homeschool families even within predominantly Black rural communities. In this study, rural also meant frequent incidences of awkward interactions with political and ethnic Others within the community or the need to avoid such interactions by silencing oneself in some way. Collins (2009) reminds us that we all respond to such oppressions in different ways. But it is interesting to note that rural Black home educators discussed racialized experiences that occurred outside of schools more frequently than what appears in the literature on urban Black home education.

Overall, this initial study of rural Black homeschooling disrupts the idea that homeschooling is a white and urban/suburban only phenomenon, and contributes to counter narratives demonstrating that Black families everywhere care about, and invest deeply in their children's education.

Implications for Future Research

The isolation of Black rural home school families challenges the ability to conduct large scale research on Black rural homeschooling. Infrastructure to support homeschooling overall is still in development. Black home educators are constructing their own infrastructure via social media and other digital platforms. But these may be difficult for non-home educator researchers to access.

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Challenges & Opportunities for STEM Teachers in Rural Schools: A Case Study

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Abstract

This project is a single ongoing case study that focuses on the teaching experiences of two early-career math teachers working in rural schools and the factors that influenced their decision to work in these environments (Yin, 2014). Both teachers are graduates of Clarkson University's STEM Up NY program, a National Science Foundation (NSF)-funded Robert Noyce Teacher Scholarship Program designed to strengthen STEM teaching and to learn in high-need schools. This project is part of a larger, 14-partner Noyce research collaboration focusing on STEM teacher persistence, retention, and recruitment (TPR2) in rural schools. TPR2 addresses the national shortage of STEM teachers in rural communities, which is critical for future student success. This larger project seeks to identify programmatic features of STEM teacher preparation programs that aid in rural STEM teachers' recruitment, retention, and persistence.

Keywords: STEM, rural, teacher, Noyce

Introduction

The demand to fill STEM careers with homegrown talent persists. While STEM may be integrated into curricula at a young age, attracting and retaining qualified STEM teachers at all K-12 levels is difficult. According to the American Association for Employment in Education, teaching positions in mathematics, physics, and chemistry were in the top five highest shortage areas in the US in 2018 (AAEE, 2018). STEM teacher shortages are widespread but are even more prevalent in rural areas. Although young professionals may seek out rural areas to be closer to family or to take advantage of the lower population density and opportunities to enjoy outdoor recreational activities, rurality has its own unique challenges that can lead to a limited pool of potential applicants to fill available teaching positions. Administrators have shared that finding STEM teachers willing to work in rural areas is sometimes the most difficult challenge (Brenner et al., 2022). Higher poverty rates and geographic isolation can make recruitment difficult. Small rural communities often lack political capital and suffer from a loss of economic base and inadequate funding (Showalter et al., 2017; 2019), which translates to lower teaching salaries and fewer resources. In addition to a general lack of access to quality programming, and materials, teachers in rural schools may often teach multiple subjects because there are fewer faculty and staff. Rural students also have barriers such as fewer resources and skewed values between school and home. For these reasons, rural areas are often seen in an unfavorable light (Aragon, 2016). Rural students face inequitable access to quality STEM education as a result. Moreover, the lack of resources and,

often, limited parental involvement also contribute to leaving rural schools on the fringe of quality STEM education.

Nevertheless, there are positive benefits to teaching in rural schools. Rural teachers tend to know their students and their families well because they may have taught a sibling or parent of their student; additionally, because the school district is often one of the larger employers in the area, teachers may even know parents who work in the school. Azano et al. (2019) claim that more rural students can get a good STEM education if preservice teachers are trained to deal with the unique challenges of rural schools. Understanding how STEM teachers overcome unique barriers in rural schools and preparing preservice STEM teachers can improve the recruitment and retention of quality STEM teachers, ultimately increasing equitable access to effective STEM education for rural students (Azano et al., 2019). With the proper resources, support, and persistence, rural spaces can remodel themselves to be sustainable and innovative. In this project, we explore the narrative that supports rural school teaching success and how teachers can leverage rural spaces to create success in schools.

Literature Review

There is a shortage of STEM teachers in K–12 schools across the country. However, this deficit manifests differently depending on geography, demographics, and subject area. Rural schools have trouble hiring and maintaining talented instructors. STEM teacher shortages are a consistent challenge across the US, and rural school shortages are most pronounced, especially in high-poverty, rural, and low-achieving schools (Cowan & Goldhaber, 2015; Anthony et al., 2017). In addition to limited resources, the challenges are often intensified by the fact that many rural areas lack access to broadband connectivity (Croft & Moore, 2019; Saw & Agger, 2021).

While this is true, we also know that high-quality STEM teachers can play a significant role in student learning (Maynes & Hatt, 2015). Tackling STEM teacher work shortages can help create more equitable opportunities for students. Both urban and rural schools tend to be considered high-need schools, yet fewer resources have been established to improve STEM teaching in rural schools (Azano et al., 2019). While it's easy to focus on the drawbacks of working in rural schools, the benefits of working in these rural spaces often get overlooked. In our fascination with large metropolitan areas, rural areas often get seen as secondary to their primary urban center (Brenner & Franz, 2015). Some of these benefits include small class sizes, more teacher autonomy, and leadership opportunities (Sutcher et al., 2016). Rural areas can also offer refuge for those seeking time outdoors and wanting to participate in natural recreation spaces. This may warrant recruiting teachers interested in living in and spending time in rural areas, not just mass recruitment. This strategy may help to draw teachers who are more likely to persist and be retained in rural schools (Goodpaster et al., 2015). Still, there are national, state, and local plans to find and keep employees. Some of these strategies include "grow-your-own" programs, incentives for teachers who are willing to teach in schools or subject areas with the most need, better recruitment and hiring practices, more support for teachers at the school level, and the use of interactive technologies to meet informational and professional development needs. At the national level, there is discussion about a "national manpower policy" for education, alternative certification programs, different incentives for teaching in schools that are hard to staff, mentoring programs, and ways to improve school culture and working conditions (Garcia, A. 2022).

There will always be compelling reasons for educators, especially young educators, to leave the district where they work. Some reasons include young educators getting married or because they don't have a strong support system. The prevalently highlighted solution is to find and train local talent since they already have roots and are less likely to move away if given good benefits. A review of research and practice shows that there are good ways to find and keep good teachers in rural classrooms; some strategies include 1) collecting state and local data on teacher supply and demand, 2) base recruitment efforts on data analysis, 3) expand or refine recruitment efforts to increase the pool of candidates, 4) include all vital partners in collaborative efforts, 5) offer targeted incentives, 6) regularly evaluate efforts, 7) invest in "grow-your-own" initiatives to develop teachers, 8) encourage universities to customize teacher education programs, and 9) include building levy funding. (C. McClure & C. Reeves, 2004). These strategies help substantiate some success; however, there is still “a dearth of knowledge about rural teacher preparation” (Moffa & McHenry Sorber, 2018, p. 27), and less is known specifically about rural STEM teacher preparation.

Methodology

Our current project focuses on two early-career math teachers' experiences in rural schools and the factors that impacted their decision to work in these spaces. Seven scholars' data was collected and analyzed; however, these two teachers were selected to be shared in this study. The two cases shared here were the most “telling” examples, meaning the researchers selected these two teachers because they represent “telling” examples in the sense that “the particular circumstances surrounding [each] case serve to make previously obscure theoretical relationships suddenly apparent” (Mitchell, 1984, p. 239). Both teachers are alumni of our STEM Up NY program, a Noyce program at Clarkson University funded by the National Science Foundation (NSF) to help strengthen STEM teaching and learning in high-need schools. This project is also part of a larger collaborative research project, a Noyce research program, focusing on STEM teacher retention, recruitment, and persistence in rural schools.

A single-embedded case study design was employed for this study (Yin, 2014). Both teachers were interviewed, and interviews were then analyzed using classical grounded theory techniques (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The interviews were openly coded to identify the initial codes using the software Dedoose (sample interview questions are shared in Table 1). The teachers also wrote weekly journal reflections on their teaching that consisted of open-ended prompts such as, “What went well this week?”, “What can be improved upon” and “What students stand out to you this week and why?”. The data sources included interviews, post-interview notes, and weekly journal reflections, all of which were analyzed to allow cross-validity checks (Patton, 2002) and to enable triangulation of findings (Howe & Stubbs, 2003). The journal reflections added to the richness of the data and enabled the researchers to better understand the early career teachers. A grounded theory approach was used to make a coding schema to capture the major categories appearing in the data. The codes were focused on characterizing the words that the participants used as they expressed their thoughts.

Table 1: *Semistructured Interview Questions: Sample Questions*

1. How would you describe your school, and what do you believe makes it a rural school?
2. What do you think is important to know about teaching, specifically in a rural school?
3. How can the local rural community support students to become interested in STEM?

4. How can STEM teachers support students to become interested in STEM?

Each researcher inductively developed codes, which were kept in a “living codebook” (Reyes et al., 2021). The codebook is a table that was simultaneously updated as new data was analyzed. The analysis was an iterative process, where the researchers met three times to discuss their codes, each noting similarities and resolving interpretive discrepancies. Codes that had to be negotiated were shared with faculty members of the Noyce team; this strategy is consistent with other teams conducting qualitative research (Cornish et al., 2014; Richards & Hemphill, 2018). In the next step, researchers determined which codes could be grouped into broader categories to move toward theme generation (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Researchers carefully examined the codes to ensure their placement was appropriately identified (Sample codes are in Table 2).

Table 2: Codebook Sample Showing Relevant Themes Including One Example Code for each Theme

	Theme	Example Code	Code Definition
Research Question	Theme 1 <i>Community Connection</i>	Family of student	Instances of any connection to a family member of a student (coached sibling, colleague, etc.).
	Theme 2 <i>Habits of Mind</i>	Lifelong learner	Instances refer to continuous learning or professional development.
	Theme 3 <i>Potential Opportunities</i>	Elective course	Any reference to a course based on local people or place.

Three salient themes were found through reading and re-reading the preliminary analysis of the data. The themes discovered include 1) Community Connection, 2) Habits of Mind, and 3) Potential opportunities. To strengthen or triangulate the analysis, member checks were completed by sharing the data with participants to confirm the participants’ experiences were accurately captured. The follow-up communications helped to triangulate the data and confirm findings (Patton, 2002).

Findings

There are many challenges in rural education; however, we look at how two teachers have made positive contributions and success in their role as STEM teachers in rural schools. We also learn what factors matter to them when deciding where to teach and what they want from their teaching career. We ask, how do STEM teachers create positive experiences working in rural schools, and what factors impact their decision to continue working in these spaces? This section describes three themes developed by analyzing the data from two math teachers: community connection, Habits of Mind (HoM), and potential opportunities.

Community Connection

The connection to the community was a significant part of the data collected. This theme supports the idea that individuals need to become a part of the community for rural communities to thrive. It also highlighted the connection made when teachers grew up in a similar setting as their students. Kyle is from a rural area in the northeast; while he did not specifically seek a rural school to work in, he felt more drawn to rural areas because it was what he was used to. Kyle states

I mean it's you could find a close community anywhere really but it definitely feels different, like for a small town type of thing. You know everyone knows you, you know everyone and generally people do care. The people in the community are definitely involved in your life. I just feel more comfortable, you know, in the middle of nowhere. I know that sounds weird to most people...

I believe this roots back to where I grew up. I grew up in a small town community that has its fair share of poverty. Looking back on my town, I will always remember how community members would come together to escape their problems for a big high school sports game. During those games, it didn't matter what wage you earned, where you lived, or what car you drove, all that mattered was the moment.

Back at [undergraduate institution], I met a lot of kids that grew up on farms, that were farmers. But they were interested in engineering, because it combines some of the stuff they've already learned by being a farmer and, especially, you know they get excel and engineering, a lot of them. People that went to [undergraduate institutions] came from those backgrounds, not all of them, but a lot of them did. Someone in their family kinda showed them how farming is connected to engineering. So it made sense.

Kyle talks about his identity as growing up in a rural area and attending college with other rural students. Kyle identifies himself as a 'rural person,' so it should not be surprising that he prefers life in a rural area, even with its challenges. One example quote from Kyle was coded as both community connection and potential opportunities. Kyle discussed being white in a predominantly Black school and becoming the JV basketball coach:

So the school I was at, you know I would consider the deep south and also very rural, I mean, there's no one out there and...there was...I wouldn't say racial tension, but, you know the white kids stayed with the white kids and the black kids stayed with the black kids. Everyone gets along [fine] and most people [are] from here. The gym teacher [who is black] was born and raised there. So that helped him, you know. And he affirmed me. So that helped me as well...and I grew with them [the kids]. And we gained respect for each other, and just you know for the love of basketball. I mean that [connection with basketball] helps. I see, I think, like it helped my relationships in school...that definitely helped.

Even if I was only coaching for an hour or two, I knew I was helping these kids in basketball and momentarily escaping reality. There is no greater feeling than seeing the joy on a player's face that is happy to be back at practice. I've had many of my players tell me that

basketball practice was the only thing they had to look forward to. Unfortunately, it is also true that far too many students believe sports talent alone is their only way out of their current living situation...I've learned that teachers in high needs school districts are so much more than teachers. As this was the case with my high school, teachers in high needs schools might be the only authority figures and role models that the students have. For this reason alone, we need quality teachers in these schools.

Expanding on his role and identity in the school, Kyle describes how many of his students viewed him. He states

I was like the first math teacher that stuck around, at least these kids say that...that alone I kid you not, that alone kinda was like Oh, my goodness, they told me before that they never have had a stable math teacher in like five years...you know they love me, of course, I did a good job, but I am motivated also because they haven't had and they told me, you know we don't a lot of math teachers, they don't stay here, they don't stay for whatever reason... I was like I love it here. But it's just, it was just different very, very different...I'm gonna be real honest. So.The school. You know I would consider the deep South and also very rural, I mean...there's no one out there and...there was, I wouldn't say racial tension, but...you know the white kids stayed with the white kids, the black kids with the black kids...okay...but you know if you group them together everyone gets along fine, like they just naturally go that way it's very it was very, very weird. I think, like like my relationships in school and even in basketball, they both definitely helped...

The second teacher, Rich, is teaching in a town similar to where he grew up. He describes his perception of the community and what teaching in a rural school district feels like, his connection with the community in several different aspects, and describes the school he is teaching in now.

I grew up not far from rural areas. I think more of my friends were from rural areas and [undergraduate institution] was in a very rural area. I was a TA there too and lots of the kids I worked with were probably from rural areas. Or it just seemed like it. The school I'm currently teaching in is...probably...rural and suburban? And I live in the more rural part of town. There are lots of family members who work in the district too, like, I have a kid in class who's mom works at the elementary school and they have siblings in the district. It's pretty common to see like a whole or part of a family in the district. So I guess because of that...they're like really into what's going on at school, like it's not just a kid in my class, but it's like they have this network at school. I think you have to really see that, like acknowledge that, it's just like a part of what the school and families are like here. If you're not a local, like I didn't grow up here, you have to still like respect how it is here. I think if you want to stay teaching here you have to get that...you can't be like oh I'm here now just do things my way...there's definitely a buy-in with the people...

Rich acknowledges that the culture of the school and people are integral to becoming "accepted" and included in the district. There are local values and a way of life in the school district and the people who attend there, so teachers need to find a way to connect to that culture.

Habits of Mind (HoM)

As the data was analyzed, similar codes appeared in both Kyle and Rich related to who they are as individuals or having to do with their disposition. Dispositions in teaching can be thought of as what decisions are being made in a classroom and how that is based on an individual teacher. Using this idea, we use Costa & Kallick's (2008) definition of Habits of Mind (HoM). HoM can be thought of as "dispositions" that help individuals to work through life situations to gain a positive outcome. HoM are essentially the tools used in attentive decision-making. The second theme we identified from the data is HoM. Costa & Kallick provide a list of 16 life-related skills or HoM; here, we focus on four HoM that presented themselves in the data: Persistence, listening with understanding and empathy, applying knowledge to new situations, and remaining open to continuous learning.

Persistence

Productive teachers don't give up easily; they strategize how to solve problems and stick with their goals to help students. These teachers ask their colleagues for alternative strategies to help their students; if something does not work, they're willing to try another method. Kyle described his mindset when he started working in the school and what his mentor shared with him.

...basically this guy [mentor] said, you know it's gonna be a lot of negative teachers, once you get a feel for the school find the true teachers that like really, really care about the kids...and once you find those teachers. Those are the one you should go to. For advice and support...I had I was just lucky enough to have a room next to like the teacher of the year for that county... So I was like that's the guy I want to be like you know, like...he's got it he knows what's going on, like he was just such a fantastic teacher everything he did...even when things were tough he just pushed through and didn't quit...you know like give up on the kids or anything. I think...yeah...he showed me how to stick through it even when teaching gets hard. And it does get tough...a lot sometimes...

Listening with Understanding and Empathy

Teachers who listen to students with understanding learn not only about what students are saying explicitly, what may be hidden underneath the surface. Listening to others speak is generally not taught and rare in teacher education. However, it is essential to connect with students. Rich describes what he realized after listening intently to students:

Once you get to know the students and really, kind of understand them, some of them, I mean a bunch in my classes, were really not thinking about going to college or just didn't think it was for them. So I realized talking about grades in class and the importance of college wasn't going to work, I needed a different carrot.

Applying Knowledge to New Situations

People learn from experience and reflect on experiences. When teachers face a challenge in the classroom, they may draw on previous experiences. Teachers recall prior knowledge and experience to help them with the problem at hand; Rich states,

I was having issues with getting the class settled when they first came into the room, then I thought back to my mentor teacher during residency...she had a system in place, so the kids knew what to do soon as they walked in. They had an entrance ticket every day, even if it was something silly or just not even related to math directly, but there was something for them to get done when they walked in. I created some math questions as entrance tickets, nothing too challenging, but something I know they can do when they walk in...it took some time to become a regular thing, but it's help...it's like they know what they should be doing now.

Recollection can be a powerful tool for teachers; to take what they learned and carry it forth to help solve a new challenge gives them more experience to draw from.

Remaining Open to Continuous Learning

Good teachers are in a perpetual state of learning; they are always looking to grow, improve, and adapt. Teachers with this HoM realize that no student is the same and no classroom is the same, and so they find each classroom, each challenge, and each student as an opportunity to learn.

I learned a lot when I did my residency, but nothing really prepares you for like that first year of teaching. I mean, even though I knew a lot...I was like still trying to figure out how things would work here, what adjustments I had to make...and, I don't know...I just have this sense that even though I know some stuff, I don't know everything...especially in a new building, a new school...I think it's helpful to be somewhat humble and take in what you can from your new colleagues. They have a lot they can teach me...even if I don't always agree, I am willing to walk away with something, something new I learned, from them...

Good teachers are not static; they are always learning and growing. These four HoM shared here help highlight what characteristics are important to success as a teacher, particularly in a rural setting. Dispositions make up just a part of the teacher, but HoM help to show how dispositions are connected to making a decision in the classroom. While other HoMs may have been present in the data, these four HoMs were most prevalent in the data.

Potential Opportunities

A third theme that was salient in the data was the different opportunities available to teachers in these rural schools. Typical, rural schools are talked about for lacking opportunities or not having enough resources. The teachers were given opportunities to enhance their teaching positions in these two cases. Kyle, for example, stated

My principal saw my resume and was like, hey, you know we're trying to get going with project lead the way...we're trying to get the ground rolling with this because they're so far behind they didn't like have a program established. [My principal] was like you're gonna do math and you're definitely doing that engineering class that you're certified to teach...I mean that's what I went to school originally, you know the funny part is... I kind of joke about like...I got out of engineering for a reason. But I do know a lot about it and all my friends that I graduated with...you know they're all engineers and I actually had a few of them come [into class] over zoom.

Kyle also spoke about coaching basketball at the school, an opportunity that arose when he first started working there, he said

I never expected to coach basketball...I just assumed that I wouldn't have the skills to coach, I mean I play but that's not the same thing. They needed a coach if they were going to have a team so when there's less people to pick from it was easier for me to get to coach I guess...but it ended up being this awesome thing. Like lots of my students were on the team and that helped with the school part too.

Rich also shared an opportunity that he was not expecting to have as a newer teacher

Because the small size of my class, I was able to try out some different things in my class that I wouldn't have been able to in a school like I did my residency in...that was just too big, too many students and probably would have been kind of a disaster. One nice thing about my classes now are they're small, like less than fifteen kids, so I have more time to try different things in class. I had a lot of experience doing math modeling as an undergrad so I could do it in this class too because it was just easier with a smaller group.

These are just a few examples of opportunities in these secondary rural schools for STEM teachers. These three themes were established, helping to understand what considerations exist when a STEM teacher thinks about working in a rural school. Kyle and Rich described how their opportunities and choices helped them succeed as STEM teachers in rural settings.

Discussion

Recruiting strategies help bring STEM teachers to rural areas; however, school districts still have the challenge of retaining these teachers. According to Ingersoll et al., 2018, more than a third of teachers leave the field within the first three to five years of teaching. Instead of considering what rural spaces lack, it can be more beneficial to highlight the supports and opportunities that rural spaces offer STEM teachers. By emphasizing a positive narrative about teaching in rural spaces, new STEM teachers can envision what their teaching career may look like in the future. There is a better chance of these new teachers seeing themselves in these locations.

In this project, Kyle talked about being connected to the community in different ways that helped ground him in the community and school. Kyle grew up in a similar community and sought out a similar environment; school community members can seek out new teachers and genuinely connect them with the community. This can be easily overlooked, so it's important to remind other leaders in the district to help new teachers feel like a part of the community (Roberts et al.,

2021). Teachers who feel like a part of the community have the potential to connect with students' families and thereby greatly impact their influence on students. Additionally, students who grew up in similar communities may serve as role models to these students. In this project, Kyle and Rich grew up in similar communities as their students and graduated with a STEM degree not long ago. Students can look up to these two STEM teachers as mentors who can help them navigate their path in secondary school and beyond. Having these mentors who bring social capital with them can be a wealth of knowledge for some students. For example, Kyle talks about how farming is connected to engineering; he can also speak to his own experience as an engineering major and the kinds of questions he was asking himself along the way. Simultaneously it is productive for administrators to think about sharing the different local opportunities to help teachers be involved in the community. Rural areas may have fewer opportunities for events and activities; administrators may need to think beyond the typical strategies for recruitment (Brenner, Azano, & Downey, 2021).

The four HoM shared here may impact all teachers all over; however, these habits are particularly impactful in a rural setting due to the context of rural schools. For example, we want all of our teachers to be able to listen with understanding and empathy. In a rural setting, this is especially important because students who live in the rural community, day-to-day, can provide insight, perspectives, and values. In this case, because Rich listened to his students, he understood how students felt about college; he realized it could not be the 'carrot' to incentivize students but also learned he could have conversations about this topic to understand why they felt this way and potentially share different perspectives about going to college. Listening to students here brings Rich closer to the community and helps to understand what they value. In rural areas, many students feel pressured to stay in the area to help their families. This may influence the effort students put into school and their long-term career plans. Using this knowledge, Rich can help students see how STEM is connected to their local community, potentially incentivizing their pursuit to further their education and return home. Or maybe to find out how they can further their education, pursue STEM, and stay near home. Instead of trying to pull rural students out of where they live, it may be more fruitful to find out how rural students can still live near their families and have fulfilling STEM careers. Another HoM found in this project, open to continuous learning, can help teachers become more effective, specifically in rural areas. For example, place-based curricula have been routinely used in rural communities. For teachers, using place-based pedagogy can leverage students' knowledge about their locale, aiming to make learning more relevant. By doing so, students are free to bring their own funds of knowledge or their own body of knowledge based on their experiences to the classroom. Teachers can then help facilitate connections between students' funds of knowledge and curricula, and teachers can also learn from their students (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005; Vélez-Ibáñez, & Greenberg, 1992).

Rural schools are often discussed with deficit language, such as a lack of opportunities. However, with some intentional and creative thinking, there are spaces for opportunities for students in this setting. For example, in this project, Kyle had a background in engineering even though he was a math teacher. The principal at that school realized this was an opportunity to leverage the skills Kyle brought with him and develop the Project Lead the Way program (a nonprofit organization that empowers students in STEM) the school has been trying to initiate and also considered creating an engineering class so students in the community could learn about how engineering is connected to their lives, potentially learning about engineering jobs and living in rural communities. This project can help inform teacher educators as they work to prepare future rural teachers and support in-service teachers. Geographically rural areas have one of the

most promising yet underutilized opportunities for STEM education. This data can help better support STEM teaching and learning in rural schools.

Conclusion

One of our roles as teacher educators is to fight for marginalized students to receive an equitable education. As a STEM education community, we must leverage our positions to create authentic change and examine our assumptions about what we believe is best for our students in rural communities. Holding onto deficit language and negative stereotypes can be harmful to students (Steele, 2010; Steele & Aronson, 1995) and may ultimately prevent high-quality STEM teachers from working in rural schools; this would be a disservice to rural communities. Doing self-reflective and critical work can help other educators see the richness of rural communities.

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Teaching for Understanding of Social Diversity in the Face of Urbanization in Rural Southern Ontario (Canada)

Joanne Pattison-Meek

Abstract

This empirical study provides a rare glimpse inside one classroom setting to explore the ways one high school Civics teacher taught for pluralist citizenship in his rural community, in anticipation of looming urbanization. This study demonstrates concrete ways of teaching and learning to navigate difference and conflict in seemingly homogeneous classroom settings. Using a qualitative case study approach (Yin, 2018), data collected in southern Ontario (Canada) include classroom observations, teacher interviews, group interviews with students, and analysis of classroom documents. The findings challenge mainstream understandings of diversity typically embedded in some multicultural education and citizenship education scholarship to include less visible diversities as important elements of living in a pluralist democracy.

Keywords: rural, urbanization, pluralist citizenship, diversity, high school, pedagogy

Introduction

In southern Ontario (Canada), many small, rural communities have become a residential haven for city dwellers, especially in the wake of COVID-19 (CBC, 2022). Rapid urban development is on the rise as housing supply and demand challenges continue in urban centers such as Toronto. Between 2016 and 2021, Canada's rural population grew the fastest among G7 countries, alongside Germany, the only other G7 country with positive rural population growth rates (Statistics Canada, 2022). Emerging scholarship attends to the role of small and rural schools as key stakeholders in regional urban development (e.g., Tatabe, 2021). However, to date, very little is known about how teachers in rural classrooms, who anticipate such demographic shifts, prepare their students for changes which may alter the sociodemographic composition of their rural school and community. As one means to do so, education for pluralist citizenship cultivates and supports young citizens' understandings and respect for diversity.

The purpose of pluralist citizenship education is to teach and learn about the political processes that build a socially and culturally diverse society (Joshee & Sinfield, 2010). Teaching for pluralist citizenship, a prominent theme in citizenship curricula across Canada (Bickmore, 2014), can pose challenges for teachers in majority white, rural schools (Parmar, 2017; Washington & Humphries, 2011). Students in some rural settings may be perceived as having limited opportunities to interact with social identities and cultures that differ from their own based on a presumed rural homogeneity (Reed, 2010; Rose, 2022). Such static conceptions of a singular rural culture

ignore the multiple lived experiences and ideological differences already embedded within and among rural communities (Pattison-Meek, 2018; Yao, 1999). Rural contexts that may appear similar along lines of race still inevitably embody many kinds of human differences.¹

This empirical study provides a rare glimpse inside one classroom to explore the ways one high school Civics and Citizenship² teacher in rural Ontario taught for understanding of social diversity in the face of anticipated urbanization. This article explores how this teacher, Mr. Byrne, selected and implemented subject matter and pedagogies affirming and probing students' perspectives and experiences in relation to social difference, and applied elements of culturally responsive pedagogy in his majority white classroom.

Teaching for Pluralist Citizenship: Pedagogical Approaches and Orientations

All classrooms, as contested social spaces, embody difference and conflict. Classrooms are public places—a mirror of society—that bring together individuals already equipped with dissimilar social experiences in civic life. As Parker (2010) argues, schools, and therefore classrooms, are perhaps the most diverse spaces that youth will find themselves for sustained lengths of time. As a public forum, the classroom is the first opportunity for many students to air their knowledge and value claims, while they are simultaneously brought into contact with beliefs that conflict with their own (Hess, 2009; King, 2009). Thus, classrooms are possibility-spaces for citizenship-oriented teachers to elicit and facilitate various social and ideological differences among those who populate them.

In this article, I draw on Miller's (2007) framework to inform the types and characteristics of pluralist citizenship pedagogy for surfacing and navigating difference observed in one teacher's Civics classroom. Miller's three holistic curriculum orientations—transmissional, transactional, transformational—emphasize how differing citizenship curriculum goals influence the pedagogical experiences to which teachers give priority. A holistic approach to education views all aspects of social life as interconnected, positioning relationships and human experience (including human differences) within the learning environment.

In a transmissional approach, the teacher transmits factual knowledge to an assumed passive learner. This conventional type of teaching emphasizes lecture and recitation (mastery of content). A transactional approach, in contrast, views knowledge as fluid and constructed, and the individual learner as an inquirer and problem-solver of social and political dilemmas. Young people arrive in the classroom prepared with diverse experiences with civic life, such as experiences of social inclusion/exclusion or discussing political issues with family, peer groups, and social media (Lievrouw, 2011). Teachers facilitate interactions to promote transaction (e.g., sharing) of various ideas and experiences, such as through rationale dialogue. Classroom discussion pedagogies that include discordant viewpoints are associated with building students' capacities and dispositions to engage with pluralist democratic citizenship (Bickmore, 2014b; Hahn, 2010).

In the transformational approach, learners are regarded as having the capacity and agency to achieve social transformation through collaboration with others, and not merely "reduced to a set of learning competencies or thinking skills" (Miller, 2007, p. 11). Pedagogy can be "personally and socially meaningful" when it is inclusive of students' different life experiences (Miller, 2007, p. 12) and views them as already democratic citizens, not merely citizens-in-training (Biesta,

1. While the rural community described in this case study is predominantly white, the author acknowledges that this does not reflect the demographic makeup of all rural areas.

2. Referred to as Civics throughout the article.

2007). Simultaneous implementation of Miller's orientations in teaching for pluralist citizenship is likely, and expected: classrooms may exhibit overlapping aspects of each and to different degrees in any lesson and/or course of study.

Methodology

This article focuses on one teacher's understandings and practices of pluralist citizenship education to teach for understanding of social diversity in one predominantly white and rural classroom in the province of Ontario. This classroom case study is comprised of one Civics high school classroom and focused on the interactions between the teacher and one group of students (n=18), and among students, occurring in the classroom. Civics is a mandatory course for all grade 10 students (14-15 years of age) in the province. Data collection methods included 26 hours of classroom observations, 2 semi-structured teacher interviews, 3 semi-structured group interviews with 10 students (one interview per student), and analysis of classroom documents (including anonymized student written work).

Knowledge acquired through qualitative case study is distinguishable from other research knowledge because it is concrete, vivid, and uses the senses. Case studies involve colorful descriptions of specific instances of real people in action. The rich, thick descriptions (Geertz, 1973) provided in this case study invite readers to experience the issue for themselves (Rossman & Rallis, 2012). Firestone (1993) refers to "case-to-case transfer," whereby the reader asks: what can I take from these findings to apply to my own situation?

Data analysis is a process of moving up "from the empirical trenches to a more conceptual overview of the landscape" (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 261). Drawing on Miller's transmissional, transactional, and transformational pedagogical orientations, I organized and coded the raw data contained in typed transcripts of interviews, field notes, and quotes/passages from documents. Miller's framework helped me to consider how to assign codes (look-fors) to each orientation so that I could make sense of various classroom strategies to explore different kinds of differences. Some initial examples of these look-fors included lecture, recitation (transmissional); co-developing understandings with peers, inclusion of multiple perspectives, active listening (transactional); and interrogating bias, supporting student agency (transformational). I solicited teacher feedback on my emergent understandings of what I was seeing and hearing in the data. This was an important strategy to avoid misinterpreting the meanings of what teachers say and do, and to identify and keep in check my own biases as researcher (Maxwell, 2005).

Overview: Mr. Byrne and Vandenberg High School

Vandenberg High School is located in a small working-class, rural community in southern Ontario. At the time of study, the high school drew just under 500 students from in-town and the wider rural areas. The town is located approximately 45 minutes from one of Ontario's most racially and ethnically diverse cities. However, from my observations, such visible diversities did not yet appear to have permeated Vandenberg's school population.

Mr. Byrne had taught at Vandenberg High School for all eight years of his teaching career. White and in his early-30's, he identified as Canadian-born and of Scottish heritage. He had spent the early part of his career as a guidance counselor before migrating to the classroom to teach Civics, History, Geography, and Law courses. In my casual conversations with some of his Civics students, I learned that Mr. Byrne had gained a reputation as a fun, "open-minded" teacher who

cares a great deal about Vandenberg students and the local community. One male student described Mr. Byrne as “one of the good guys [...] he gets where we come from.” Mr. Byrne was a graduate of Vandenberg High School and often shared stories with the class about his student experiences from “back in the day.”

Mr. Byrne recognized that the small town was on the cusp of demographic change with the arrival of a planned rail transit link to/from nearby cities. This transportation feature, in combination with the town’s relatively low cost of living and home prices, was expected to attract families from more crowded, higher-priced, racially and ethnoculturally diverse (sub)urban areas to “move out to the country.” As a result, the demographic makeup of Vandenberg was expected to change in the coming years. Mr. Byrne shared with me an urgency in his citizenship teaching to draw attention to some of the uninformed, intolerant views he sometimes heard expressed by some students about people who were not reflected in Vandenberg’s “white norm” – perspectives he understood as rooted in family upbringing and the local community.

Some students in Mr. Byrne’s Civics class shared that because Vandenberg was predominantly white and rural, there was little opportunity for violence to occur, which they assumed would be caused by people who differed from the ostensibly white norm. “Because [Vandenberg’s] a small town, we’re all the same. We don’t have much trouble ’cause of different people coming from different places.” This student’s view of Vandenberg as monocultural and thus safe was also expressed in another group interview:

- Alyssa: Some of the people are super closed-minded ’cause [Vandenberg] doesn’t have as much, like, we’re pretty much all one culture except for like a select few people. We’re like...
- Jim: Isolated! (*laughing*)
- Alyssa: Yeah, we’re kind of like a little pocket of white people.
- Lauren: Like we’re all the same culture basically.
- Jim: But one good thing is you don’t have to deal with certain issues or disagreements ... it’s hard to explain.
- JPM: Can you think of an example?³
- Jim: Like crime and racism I guess.

These excerpts suggest, for those students quoted, that non-Anglo differences were viewed as a potential cause of conflict—thus associating their perceived homogeneity, whiteness, and rurality with social harmony. Such assumptions pose a challenge for citizenship educators to find ways to interrupt the *status quo* rooted in oppressive social hierarchies.

During our first interview, Mr. Byrne reflected on his recent experience teaching a previous semester’s “challenging” Civics class. Many students, he said, had expressed “more shocking xenophobic and intolerant” views concerning particular social groups (e.g., non-Anglo new immigrants, non-Christian groups) publicly in class than he had heard before. He shared that this earlier

3. Question posed by author/researcher.

teaching experience, in combination with looming local demographic changes in the community, had a significant influence on the subject matter and pedagogies he selected for his citizenship teaching. “This has always been a small, tight-knit rural town that has so far escaped the effects of urbanization. This will change.” He theorized that if he could create opportunities for students to recognize and explore different kinds of social differences already existing in their seemingly homogeneous context, then perhaps more students might be open to understanding and welcoming new types of diversity that will eventually arrive in Vandenberg. He viewed the mandatory Civics course as an optimal venue to carry out this work. The course focuses on the rights and responsibilities of citizens, the processes of public decision making, and ways in which citizens can act for the common good within their communities (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013, pg. 12).

Teaching to Understand Social Diversity in One Rural Community

The following vignettes are drawn from a sequence of classroom activities Mr. Byrne designed for a unit of study, broadly focused on the theme of social justice. He planned the unit with the goal to transform some of the “misinformed” and “ignorant” views that he heard lingering in the local community. He tended to focus his change-oriented pedagogy toward students’ considerations of their own partialities and subjectivities as a means to interrogate biases and assumptions about various social identities.

Writing Task: Your Personal Beliefs

After assembling the class into small, self-selected groups of two to five students, Mr. Byrne tasked each group to brainstorm and write down what they thought constituted characteristics of social justice. Students’ initial articulations, shared back to the class by volunteers, included the elements of *fairness, equality, the law, being nice, and involved in the community*. He asked the class what they meant by “fairness.” Responses included *giving people what they need, don’t discriminate, treat people equally, treating others as you would like to be treated*.

Mr. Byrne explained that “social justice doesn’t have one definition – it can mean different things to different people.” He presented a definition on the front screen that reflected what social justice meant for him:

- (a) Social Justice is based on the concept of human rights, equality, and a fair society.
- (b) People are often defined in groups by their gender, ability, race, culture, religion, class, age, sexuality, and/or socio-economic status.
- (c) Judgments are made about people and certain groups and individuals are labeled as superior or inferior.
- (d) Social Justice is the act of trying to change these factors to create an equal, unbiased, non-prejudiced society.

Mr. Byrne asked students to “brainstorm examples of acts of social *injustice* that involve certain social groups, such as people with particular gender identities, abilities, race, religions, class, or sexuality” that they had experienced personally: i) at school, and ii) with home and family. This task generated sustained peer-to-peer group conversation. The volume in the classroom elevated significantly and I noted how previously silent and disengaged students became animated in their groups when sharing stories of school and family injustice: they leaned forward in their chairs to

listen more closely to group members, sometimes laughing and/or shaking their heads. Students' lively responses suggested that many had witnessed and/or experienced social injustice in their own lives and felt comfortable enough to share and listen to these experiences in their friend groups.

Homophobia and racism were each named among students' examples of injustice witnessed within the school. Racism, in the form of stereotypes and jokes, was acknowledged and discussed across all groups. About half of the class raised their hands to share injustice stories from home or school when invited by Mr. Byrne. The activity did surface hegemonic assumptions and harmful essentializing tendencies that students had witnessed and/or experienced themselves. One female student shared how her father had said "stupid things about Asians when we see them driving...I tell him to stop, but he thinks we're laughing too when we're not." A table of students laughed loudly following her remarks; Mr. Byrne did not react to the outburst, allowing the open forum to continue uninterrupted. Another student disclosed how her "grandparents say racist and homophobic things all the time 'cause they don't know any better."

The above activity represents a transactional learning opportunity whereby Mr. Byrne provided a dialogic space for students to air sensitive experiences with and perspectives on intolerance. Those quoted expressed anti-racist views, rejecting such intolerance, and did not seem to take on their (grand)parents' homophobia/racism – attitudes these students viewed as misinformed and ignorant. The activity brought to light a pedagogical challenge for classroom teachers: how to facilitate speech about bigotry when it surfaces openly. As Davies (2014) argues, "democratic classrooms are places where offensive views can be aired and picked apart in a relatively safe setting" (p. 454) and where "dialogue should aim to disturb, to challenge – to create turbulence" to support interruptive democracy (p. 453). Speech, however bigoted, should not be silenced, but de-legitimated through airing contrasting anti-racist and anti-homophobic perspectives, preferably those that come from students as they did in these few instances.

The following day, Mr. Byrne tasked students with a writing assignment, entitled *Your Personal Beliefs*, to further explore injustice issues and their roots. He instructed students to complete a 500-word self-assessment by choosing and responding to at least 3 questions from the following list:

- What are my biases? How do they affect the way I see the world?
- Where do my beliefs come from? (e.g., family, peers, school, religious teachings, media, experiences) To what degree are they unique to me?
- How do my personal experiences and circumstances (e.g., age, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, ethnicity, family, socioeconomic status) affect my perceptions of Others?
- How do my ancestry and nationality affect my perceptions of others?
- Am I privileged and entitled? In what ways? To what extent does this color the way I relate to the world?
- Am I oppressed or marginalized? In what ways?
- How do I treat others with beliefs and values that are different from my own?

First, Mr. Byrne read each question aloud for the class and briefly explained key terms. For instance, to illustrate how a person might be marginalized, he held up a sheet of lined paper and asked students to indicate where the margins were located on the page.

Lisa: Like, around the edges?

Mr. B: That's right. There are some groups of people who are pushed to the side, or to the margins (*pointing to the edge of the page*) of society because they aren't valued as much as other groups that are seen as more important, or in the center of society. (*pointing to the center of the page*)

Lisa: Like women and how they're marginalized in History (classes)?

Mr. B: Exactly. Or we'd call it Their-story instead of centering men...

Lisa: Or Herstory. (*she smiles*)

Mr. Byrne left the task to the students, explaining how he hoped the writing assignment would be “a way to reflect on your beliefs, where they come from, and why you are treated or treat others in particular ways.”

From anonymized samples of students' writing, I noted that many students cited their parents and families as having shaped some of their beliefs. One student remarked that she did not agree with her extended family's views “against anyone who isn't...white, male, straight, and religious”. Another student, in reference to how he treated others with beliefs and values different from his own, remarked, “I respect others beliefs but when u come to a country and try to change their beliefs that wrong. For example, the happy holiday vs. marry Christmas. If u don't like the culture don't come here [*sic*]”. This student's comment coincided with the view Mr. Byrne had expressed concern about in his interviews with me. However, these two contrasting student perspectives illustrate that such biases were not consistently expressed among students.

This low-risk, private writing assignment provided a platform for some students to acknowledge and explain their marginalized social status, as well as to question and challenge *status quo* hierarchies in their own lives—important aspects of pluralist citizenship. The samples of written work I read brought to light how some students attributed their marginalization experiences to less visible dimensions of social difference (sexuality, learning ability, religion, gender). Mr. Byrne shaped this private disclosure pedagogy to integrate (invite) students' home and community experiences into the implemented curriculum and supported some students to recognize and critique social inequities, thus supporting critical consciousness (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Diamond Ranking – Identifying Social Injustice Issues in Our Community

Following the *Personal Beliefs* writing task, Mr. Byrne implemented a *Diamond Ranking* group activity as a means for students to identify and discuss social justice issues in the local Vandenberg community. He introduced the activity by explaining that social issues were “problems that prevent our community from working as well as it could, like poverty.” In small, self-selected groups, Mr. Byrne asked students to brainstorm examples of social issues that they thought were prevalent in and around Vandenberg. After about five minutes, Mr. Byrne asked each group to share one or two examples with the class, which he wrote down on the board. Examples shared by groups included: unemployment, homelessness, drug addicts, alcoholism, disabled people, physical abuse, teenage pregnancy, single parent families, bullying, crime, people suffering from eating disorders, mental health.

Mr. Byrne then provided each group with chart paper to draw out a diamond ranking template (Appendix 1). He instructed each group to reach consensus and to write what they considered to be the “most urgent” (severe) social issue in the Vandenberg community in the top diamond and to continue ranking nine issues of their choice down to the “least urgent,”

in the bottom diamond. While groups worked on the task, Mr. Byrne circulated around the classroom to respond to questions about the various social issues and/or the task.

The group within hearing distance of my desk (3 boys, 1 girl) engaged in a lively conversation that included comments such as: “teenage parents” (“that’s their fault”), “homeless people” (“they’re lazy – that’s the same as unemployment”), “drug addicts” (“those people can get a job by cleaning their act up”). This same group wrote “Hoboes” (ranked low) on their diamond to denote homelessness as a social issue. Tara, the vocally dominant student in the group, insisted that, “being homeless is their fault. They can clean up and get a job, so put it at the bottom” (of the diamond). The other group members appeared to agree with Tara, nodding their heads, laughing, and directing comments to her. This group appeared to assign a higher priority to social issues in which they perceived individuals to have little control (e.g., disabilities). Those issues to which they understood people to have more influence over their situations (e.g., unemployment, crime, drugs) they assigned lower priority. This group espoused liberal mainstream narratives—pointing to an individual’s choices in life as the cause of their success/failure. These students did not connect individuals’ marginalized social circumstances with systemic forces. When observing this group, I was mindful of how Mr. Byrne’s self-selecting grouping strategy allowed students to sit among friends. This strategy could reinforce social hierarchies and ideological dominance (Bickmore & Kovalchuk, 2012), as might have been the situation in this group. Members might not have wanted to risk censure from peers (especially Tara) by dissenting from her approved views (Schultz, 2010).

After 10 minutes, all (5) groups hung their diamond rankings along the front board. Mr. Byrne noted that no one social issue had been consistently placed among the groups’ top three (most urgent) or bottom three (least urgent) rankings. For example, mental illness was located atop one diamond but did not appear at all in any of the others. He explained that “because we’re all different and have dissimilar life experiences and circumstances, we’re not all going to agree or understand where these social issues should be placed.” In his explanation, Mr. Byrne used the variations among diamond rankings to highlight for students their contrasting understandings of local social issues.

Lisa, a usually quiet student, raised her hand and shared, in a barely audible, trembling voice, that her family had a history of mental health problems that had led to other social issues such as addictions and eating disorders. The class fell silent when she spoke. Her all-girl group had listed mental illness as their most urgent social issue. Underneath, in the same diamond, they wrote subheadings: addiction, eating disorders, affects everyone/lots of people, depression, and anxiety, thus showing a sophisticated understanding of mental health-related issues. This was the first time Lisa exercised agency through speaking out loud in front of her classmates. Mr. Byrne shared with me after the class that Lisa suffered from severe anxiety, and he was pleased that she felt comfortable-enough to share her experiences publicly with the class. “I think [her comments] helped the others understand how mental health can be challenging for people like her who live with it every day.” This activity invited and supported Lisa to practice civic engagement by drawing attention to alternative understandings of mental illness (and thus different ways of knowing and being in the world) and the various ways it can lead to a host of other related challenges.

Poverty Cards - Interrogating Socioeconomic Disparity

Mr. Byrne endeavored to build on students' awareness of local social issues in a subsequent lesson, by inviting them to critically reflect on their personal status in the community and to consider some of the causalities of social and political problems. Each student-selected group was provided with a stapled package of poverty cards (Appendix 2). Mr. Byrne told me later that he had located the cards (each copied onto an 8.5"x11" piece of paper) from The Centre for Social Justice (Canada): a research, education, and advocacy group with a focus on equality and democracy. Each card contained a provocative heading (e.g., Behind every hungry child is a starving Mom) followed by statistical data about poverty in Ontario and/or Canada (e.g., 41% of Canadians using food banks are children), and a political message (e.g., *Vote for a living wage*). On the reverse side of each page, Mr. Byrne developed inquiry questions for each group to answer:

1. Why does poverty exist? Brainstorm 5 ways that would get a person from a "normal life" to the situation the info card presents.
2. Solutions—Brainstorm 5 solutions directly tied to the above that can prevent a person from getting into poverty.

Note: The solutions have to be based on the problems that currently exist and will continue to exist. Do not provide unrealistic answers that eliminate the problem in extreme ways. For example: "Don't have kids."

Mr. Byrne introduced the cards to the class as "politically charged statements, because [The Center for Social Justice] doesn't think poverty will go away unless everyone starts to change their behaviour." Thus, he guided students to consider how poverty may result from larger social-structural phenomena (e.g., "a too-low government-mandated minimum wage"), and not necessarily the fault of an individual. Tara's group, for example, whom I had overheard during the previous diamond activity, had not acknowledged this causal dynamic.

Mr. Byrne explained a "normal life" (see question 1 above) as "one not lived in poverty." He instructed student groups to "list ways someone can get into the situations [described on each poster] and possible solutions to solve the problem in each." He advised students "not to be extreme" in their responses, because "if you think that the easiest way to solve a problem is to be extreme in your solution, like just telling people to change their behavior, that's not going to work." Adam, a frequent contributor to class discussions, challenged Mr. Byrne's assertion:

Adam: If it's so hard, then why ask us to find solutions?

Mr. B: Because we have to stop thinking...We're just going to let it happen. Which in my opinion, our society continues to do. We just sort of say, here's the problem. Let's fundraise and throw money at it. But sometimes money doesn't exactly go to the problem. There's something deeper going on in our society. So, if I say here's 2 million dollars to stop hunger—yeah, that money could stop hunger for a certain number of people, but I'm not actually getting at solving why those people are hungry in the first place.

Adam: But a lot of poverty is due to laziness. There's a lot of disabilities and stuff, but there's a lot of laziness. So how are you supposed to stop that?

(All students focus their gaze on Mr. Byrne, awaiting his response. One student turns to her female neighbour and opens her eyes wide, seemingly surprised by Adam's confrontational remarks)

During my observational period, Mr. Byrne generally responded to such comments by disclosing his personal opinions on topics, as he did here – thereby opening space for their two different perspectives to coexist:

Mr. B: I don't disagree with you [Adam]. Do I think there are lazy people who take advantage of our system? Oh yes. I see this in our school. Do you believe there are some students in our school who know the system so well that they're going to take advantage of it? (some students nod)

I know that for sure. But I also know that there are some students in our school who need programs and supports in order to get them through school because of the situation they find themselves in. And it's through no fault or laziness of their own. The same can be said of many adults in society.

Thus, Mr. Byrne did not shut down or reject Adam's perspective, but he did gently challenge it and legitimize an alternate point of view. With eyes focused on his teacher, Adam nodded his head in response as if to indicate that he understood Mr. Byrne's points.

Mr. Byrne later shared with me his concern that if he were to rule certain comments as inappropriate, he would convey to students that their perspectives and knowledge of the world were not valued, and that this could bring discussion and learning to a halt. To shut down students' views may only serve to further entrench their beliefs and close possibility spaces for students to develop and practice types of agency: to experience and engage with the ideological diversity among their peers and reformulate ideas and views (Gordon, 2006). This activity, and this conversation, highlighted conflict among some students in their groups: some labeled people living in poverty as "lazy"—"they'd rather sit on their ass and get a cheque." Others argued that "some groups have bad things happen to them that are out of their control." Mr. Byrne's response to Adam acknowledged both perspectives.

Continuing the lesson, Mr. Byrne asked students to refer to a specific poverty card with the message: "The wealthiest families in Ontario earn \$14 ... For every \$1 the poorest earn," and to consider how a family could lose income security so easily. When no hands raised, he shared an example from his personal experience when his family had faced financial hardships while he and his brother were growing up in Vandenberg. Both of Mr. Byrne's parents had been laid off from their factory jobs within three months of each other. This caused great distress to his parents, as they did not have any savings to tide them over until they found work. Mr. Byrne disclosed that, while his parents' unemployment lasted "only a few months," it was "a period of my childhood that I will never forget...and it can happen to any of us." Mr. Byrne explained to me after this class session that he had chosen to disclose this piece of personal history because he "almost always" met with students in his classes, like Adam, who thought "poverty can't happen to them. Many [students] don't understand that some people in this small community suffer for various reasons

that are beyond their control.” He also felt that less affluent students were unlikely to share their personal accounts of “being poor” publicly with their classmates. Mr. Byrne drew from his personal history to legitimate and humanize subaltern (socio-economic) views to help guide students through difficult conceptions of pluralist citizenship and explicitly acknowledge social inequities.

When invited to share their solutions on a poverty card of their choice, one all-girl group presented their ideas in relation to the card: *Behind every hungry child is a starving Mom*. They proposed a universal childcare plan, affordable housing, and a living wage. The group named one systemic cause of poverty, “prejudice against women in the workplace,” as causing women’s unequal access to resources and having been afforded less value (in the workplace than men). Three of the five groups did not convey, either verbally or in writing, an understanding of social stratification along social group lines (such as gender, race, class or sexuality) as a cause of poverty. These three groups each included laziness as a causal factor, thus overlooking (and/or ignoring) Mr. Byrne’s earlier appeal to students to think critically, beyond individual behaviours as the root causes of poverty. One of these three groups did, however, acknowledge that parental mental illness could lead families to face hardship.

It became obvious to me through my lesson observations and our collegial conversations that Mr. Byrne had the desire to interrupt some students’ harmful assumptions: from blaming individuals for their hardships, to holding social institutions answerable for social injustice. He shared that he was still searching for strategies to represent pedagogically concepts associated with transformative citizenship (“bigger picture” systemic marginalization and oppression; Othering and normalizing processes) to make them comprehensible and meaningful for all his students (see North, 2009). “I don’t know how to make it so that [students] understand not just to look at a conflict or a person at face value, but to understand where and why they’re coming from.” In the meantime, developing empathy remained a key ingredient in Mr. Byrne’s teaching. Empathy, an affective dimension of Mr. Byrne’s citizenship teaching, included knowledge acquisition: the more students know about and understand marginalized social identity experiences and perspectives, the less inclined they might be to marginalize those who they view as different. This is an important element in citizenship education (Zembylas, 2014); however, empathy is insufficient on its own to transform the social and political conditions that enable the processes of marginalization (see Boler, 1997).

Mr. Byrne concluded the lesson by explaining how he hoped the diamond task and poverty cards had increased students’ knowledge and awareness about social diversity issues in the local community. “I often hear students talk about Vandenberg like we’re all the same—one rural entity. We all, for the most part, have different life circumstances; we are a diverse community, it’s just difficult to see sometimes.” He encouraged students to remember their conversations about social injustices as they moved into a major course project about social action, non-governmental organizations in Vandenberg.

Humanizing Local Social Injustice Issues

As a culminating project for the unit, Mr. Byrne designed an experience requiring students, in small groups, to research, visit, and interview representatives from a local, social service, non-profit charitable organization. He made connections to some of the social issues listed in the diamond rankings (still hanging on the classroom wall) to specific examples of local charitable organizations. He encouraged students to select an issue and corresponding organization to research, based on their interests and/or personal life experiences. The project did not obligate students to

actively participate and/or volunteer in any organization's operations. The purpose was for students to better understand the need for organization and how it attempted to improve people's lives. Students, in their groups, would later give a 5-10 minute presentation to the class on their experiences with the organization.

A week into the project, two students initiated a class discussion about how "making the visit [to the charity] was really hard" for them because of a limited number of organizations to choose from in the small town of Vandenberg. Another group of three students shared how they sought to visit and research the nearest women's shelter, but they needed to travel at least 30 minutes by car because direct public transportation was unavailable. Mr. Byrne told students that,

one of the challenges with living in a small town that's far away from other places is that we tend not to get the same money and services that bigger communities get. So, if people need the assistance of social service providers, families with low incomes in our rural area might not be able to access social service providers because they may not have the means.

The three students, unable to visit the women's shelter because they could not "find a lift," visited another charity they felt "less passionate learning about." Thus, some students' capacity to practice citizen agency was limited by their rural location and lack of access to public transportation. This geographic factor seemed to narrow the range of social perspectives and experiences students could engage with through the project.

In addition to researching their selected local, social service organization, Mr. Byrne encouraged students, if an opportunity arose, to invite and engage with the stories of those who required its services. In this way, Mr. Byrne implemented a transformative approach through humanizing students' understandings of marginalized peoples in the local community, thereby promoting empathy. For instance, two female students reported on their visit to the local food bank. They described how they had conducted their interview with the food bank manager from a position where they could observe how the facility operated and who it served. They expressed alarm at the apparent high level of demand for food and the wide range of clients it served:

Sara: The place was packed! I was surprised by all the people...and then I was sad because I didn't realize how many people need this place.

Taryn: And some guy came in wearing a suit! Like an actual suit! I was like, he doesn't need to come here. And (the manager) explained how it's really hard for some people to go there, 'cause it like, hurts their pride. And the man dresses up every time he goes 'cause like, it made him feel better about what was going on with him.

Sara: I just pictured homeless people going in there. Which is weird because I never see homeless people in [Vandenberg]. But I learned that lots of people fall on hard times and need some support.

Taryn's "man in the suit" story illustrated how this project brought some participating students face-to-face with people outside of their lived experiences, including those harmed by socioeconomic inequities and having perceptions they did not normally share. Such encounters can be

meaningful and transformational opportunities to support students' critical consciousness: to view socio-economic difference and inequity from multiple social group perspectives.

As in the poverty poster group activity, Taryn and Sara did not name the social injustices that might have caused sustained use of food banks in society, nor did Mr. Byrne probe for these perspectives. Teaching about the invisible causes of social class inequalities is difficult, and “means that complex feelings of ambivalence and anxiety about success and failure, possibility and constraint, entitlement and exclusion...are not open to self-examination” (Luttrell, 2008, p. 62). Social class, a less visible dimension of social difference, is also an uncomfortable topic for students to share their own realities. For example, one student interviewed shared that her mother visits the food bank once each month. She appreciated Mr. Byrne's intentions to draw attention to “life's challenges in a respectful way. I feel seen, but I don't want to share my own story. It's the first time [in school] I've had a teacher teach about my reality.”

The culminating group presentation was a vehicle for other students—if they were willing and able to exercise agency—to openly share their socially-located understandings of inclusion and exclusion. For example, one group commenced their presentation by distributing a piece of colored paper to each classmate. Lisa asked students to stand if their paper was green, to illustrate that statistically 1 in 5 people in the room had a mental illness. Lisa disclosed that she was a 1 in 5, diagnosed with an anxiety disorder which caused her to be nervous most of the time, to speak quickly, to fidget, to be nervous when ordering in restaurants, and sometimes to avoid leaving her house. Her anxiety resulted in a variety of physical ailments. She took deep breaths before she spoke, her hands trembled, and she did not make eye contact with her peers. “It's taking a toll on me mentally and physically to share my story with you. But it's important that I do so that you understand how [name of organization] supports people like me, with a mental illness, to function.” Lisa's decision to publicly disclose her struggles with mental illness surfaced a less obvious social identity difference that tends to remain suppressed in classrooms.

Another student, Jim, also presented on the topic of mental illness, focusing on the school's special education department rather than a local charitable organization. This, and his decision to work independently, did not align with the stated requirements of the project. However, Mr. Byrne made an exception to support Jim to exercise agency through sharing his personal circumstances with the class: “I've missed a lot of high school because of my mental illness. That's why I'm 18 years old and in your grade 10 class. Maybe some of you wondered why I'm here.” He attempted to laugh. Sweating profusely, Jim was visibly nervous. He kept his eyes directed down toward his presentation notes on a desk, like Lisa, and did not make eye contact with the audience—looking up only once to glance in Mr. Byrne's direction. Jim shared information from his interviews with the school's special education and student success teachers and discussed how community organizations partnered with the school to provide supportive, equitable spaces to “help people like me who need a little bit of help to be as successful as you. As someone with mental illness, I can tell you we're not lazy or stupid—we just need a leg up.” This remark was significant because it conflicted with and thus challenged Adam's earlier stated viewpoints about laziness and poverty.

Mr. Byrne's blended transactional and transformational pedagogical approach to navigate unseen diversity through social inequities in Vandenberg provided Lisa and Jim with the opportunity to express their usually marginalized voices to their classmates. Drawing on and integrating students' lived social identity experiences into the implemented curriculum provided occasions for these students to see themselves reflected in the learning, an important aspect of culturally relevant pedagogy (Villegas & Lucas, 2002). In each of their presentations, Jim and Lisa invited their au-

dience to unlearn Othering: to challenge and transform the ways in which particular social differences are stereotyped and marginalized (Davies, 2014). Student group interviews revealed that some students felt they had gained a “better understanding of mental illness,” a social difference that “we don’t really talk about or know much about. [Mental illness] is like, hidden. [Lisa and Jim] taught me that lots of people, and like teenagers, don’t want [their mental illness] out there. But if it’s not, then people think it’s a bad thing to get ashamed of.” Both of these presentations silenced the class and provoked even the usually disengaged students to exercise a type of agency: they put down their cell phones and/or removed an ear bud, looked up to the student speakers, and actively listened to the perspectives shared.

Discussion

Nieto (2004), writing on diversity education, argues that students need to recognize and understand their own culture before they can be open to the cultures of others. This assertion aligns with Mr. Byrne’s stated pedagogical approach that creating spaces for students to surface and explore their own, largely uninterrogated social diversity may support their openness and receptivity to engage with unfamiliar types of social diversity not (yet) in their rural community. As Delpit (1995) thoughtfully reminds us, “we all interpret behaviors, information, and situations through our own cultural lenses; these lenses operate involuntarily, below the level of conscious awareness, making it seem that our own view is simply ‘the way it is’” (p. 151). Thus, nurturing students’ awareness of their own culture(s) and varied lived experiences, in contrast with others, may disable some students’ “tendency to make their own community the center of the universe” (Gordon et al., 1990, p. 15).

In this classroom case, Mr. Byrne infused social inequity issues from the local community into his Civics unit (as subject matter) so that students could examine questions of bias and unequal social power. This strategy opened opportunity spaces for students to experience contrasting perspectives and ways of living in relation to less visible social differences and conflicts (e.g., heterogeneities of socioeconomic status, mental health). He also sought to expose students to silenced perspectives that did not emerge in classroom talk to transform their initial beliefs and/or to challenge dominant voices in the room (*status quo* hierarchies). For instance, to demonstrate to students the ease in which a family can fall on hard economic times and to legitimate subaltern views, Mr. Byrne disclosed his own family history of employment vulnerability. These disclosures, resulting from opportunities that invited students to include their personal experiences as part of the implemented curriculum, surfaced diverse social identity experiences (as curricular content) that often are not acknowledged in (mixed) public classrooms (Hemmings, 2000). Each of these disclosure pedagogies invited listening students to unlearn Othering (Davies, 2014).

Students may not recognize the diversity of lived social experiences and/or divergent viewpoints among their peers unless the teacher draws upon these within-community differences as sources of social identity content for examination and reflection. A crucial aspect of pluralist citizenship education is to locate and explore difference(s) among students, as themselves sources of diverse knowledge, citizen perspectives, and life experiences—including diversities that are initially less visible or obvious. Thus, teachers need to understand their learners so that they may plan activities to surface a range of their perspectives and expressions (Barton & McCully, 2007). Mr. Byrne built upon the varied lives occupying his Civics classroom; he shaped curriculum to include students’ social identities and local community relationships (Hemmings, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Miller, 2007). He applied pedagogies to integrate locally situated learning opportunities and

to make learning authentic for students so that they could see themselves reflected in the implemented curriculum. Similar to Villegas and Lucas' (2002) observations about culturally relevant teachers, I too observed how Mr. Byrne used what he knew about his students "to give them access to their learning" (p. 27). For instance, inclusive student sharing of instances of social inclusion and exclusion, exposed a range of diverse views and intersecting social identity experiences existing in the classroom and local rural community.

Conclusion

This study offers theoretical and practical insights to support citizenship educators grappling with how to approach diversity education in apparently homogeneous environments, such as rural and/or suburban student populations. The findings are also applicable to small and rural school settings that are in the early stages of, or anticipate, urbanization. The activities described illustrate how rural students themselves, when viewed by their teachers as sources of diverse knowledge (through their different values, beliefs, lived experiences), are able to name, affirm, and engage with less-obvious heterogeneities of social difference (e.g., mental health, socio-economic). The findings challenge mainstream understandings of diversity typically embedded in some multicultural education and citizenship education scholarship to include less visible social and ideological diversities as important elements of living in a pluralist democracy. Social difference, when applied using subject matter and various dialogue processes, made visible for students contrasting social identities and values to coexist in their midst.

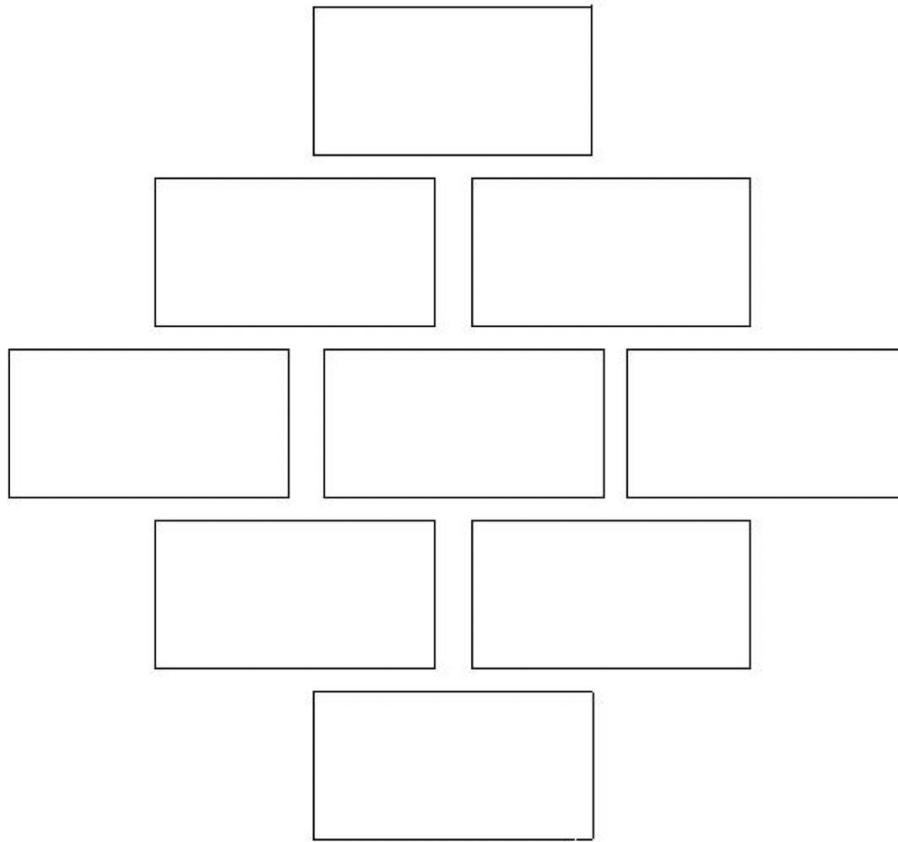
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Appendix 1. *Diamond Ranking Layout (Template)*




Appendix 2. Examples of Poverty Cards (The Centre for Social Justice, socialjustice.org)

Ask why...

- 41% of Canadians using food banks are children.
- There are over 1.2 million Canadian children living in poverty.

FACTS

- Children who live in poverty suffer poorer health
- Children who grow up in poverty are likely to be poor later in life.




Keep kids out of the foodbank:

- Vote for a living wage
- Vote for increased social assistance rates
- Vote for affordable housing

socialjustice.org

Income Gap in Ontario

The wealthiest families in Ontario earn \$14...



... For every \$1 the poorest earn.

Poverty is political. So are its solutions.

Too Many Children Live in Poverty

1 in 6 children in Ontario live in poverty

One third of children who are a visible minority live in poverty

One third of Aboriginal children live in poverty

One half of children who are new immigrants live in poverty



Poverty is political. So are its solutions.

Behind every hungry child is a starving Mom



- 41% of Canadians using foodbanks are children.
- Women are twice as likely to earn poverty wages as men
- 52.1% of Canadian single Mothers and their children live in poverty

Keep kids out of foodbanks:

- Vote for a universal childcare plan
- Vote for affordable housing
- Vote for a living wage

Raising Rural Voices: Challenges & Opportunities in Rural Alabama Schools

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Abstract

Rural schools are unique in the challenges they face; therefore, it follows that the policies to address the challenges should also be unique and not adhere to the “one size fits all” mentality. This research uses a qualitative approach and takes the bold step to seek the input of teachers who work in rural schools for suggestions on how to solve challenges found in rural schools. Eight teachers from seven rural Alabama schools across seven different districts were convened in multiple focus groups organized around four themes—federal policy, state policy, local policy, and community partnerships. The findings from this study shed light on how “one size fits all” policies, which are often created by policy-makers with an “urban” mindset, affect rural schools. Additionally, the study inspired a “rural school policy playbook” that includes recommendations for local, state, and federal policy changes to address the needs of rural schools. The solutions shared by the rural teachers we interviewed represent only the tip of the iceberg. Yet, they are important because they shed light on feasible solutions that could help address the contemporary challenges rural schools face.

Keywords: rural education policy, COVID-19, policy recommendations, consulting stakeholders

Introduction

In the United States, the COVID-19 pandemic brought significant educational hardships, including school closures, staffing shortages, and heightened stress levels amongst teachers, parents, and students to schools across the nation (American Psychological Association, 2020; Delany-Barmann et al., 2021; Dorn et al., 2020; Margolius et al., 2020; McCarthy et al., 2022). Rural schools, their teachers, and their students were especially hard hit (Aguliera & Nightengale-Lee, 2020; Delany-Barmann et al., 2021; Anderson, 2020). In part, the disproportionate pandemic-related hardships faced by rural schools were the result of exacerbated pre-existing challenges (Tieken & Montgomery, 2021).

Prior to the pandemic, rural schools experienced teacher shortages, limited broadband connectivity, transportation challenges, limited funding, and segregation along both racial and socioeconomic lines (Tieken & Montgomery, 2021). Though teacher shortages are currently occurring in nearly all regions of the country, rural and low-income urban areas are often more severely affected than other areas due to lower salaries and poorer working conditions (Sutcher et al., 2019). Working conditions for rural teachers declined even more during the pandemic, as they were called back to in-person learning sooner than their urban counterparts (Schwartz et al., 2021). The swift return to in-person learning for many rural schools was likely necessitated, at least in part, by a

lack of broadband (or reliable, high-speed broadband) access in rural areas (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021; Schwartz et al., 2021). To make matters worse, students in rural areas also had limited access to technological devices and often were sent home with paper instructional packets to complete in place of virtual learning (Wright, 2021). All of these factors, alongside limited funding, compounded to worsen existing inequities for rural schools, necessitating new, rural solutions.

Now, more than ever, it is important to understand the challenges rural schools face. At the same time, it is also critical that we look for viable solutions that could be used to alleviate them. In this study, we ask two questions that allow us to do both:

1. What are the major challenges that rural schools currently face, as described by rural teachers?
2. What policy solutions do rural teachers suggest as solutions to these challenges?

In order to better understand the contemporary challenges faced by rural schools and teachers, we conducted focus group meetings with rural teachers from the state of Alabama. Though our conversations included discussions of the pandemic's effects, the pandemic was not the sole focus. Instead, we saw the pandemic as a catalyst that cemented the need for a deeper understanding of the challenges our rural schools currently face.

During our conversations, we also asked teachers about their views on policy solutions that could be levied to improve conditions for rural schools, teachers, and students. Heeding rural-specific policy recommendations is important because policy solutions are often created for urban or suburban schools, and thus are not always relevant to the problems of rural schools (Arsen et al., 2021; Dulgrian, 2016; Gagnon & Mattingly, 2015; Weiss, 2019).

In the pages that follow, we will present the data from our conversations with eight rural teachers, highlighting the major challenges related to local, state, and federal policies that they shared with us. While teachers are a seemingly obvious choice as a resource for understanding education policy, they are rarely consulted (Ferlazzo, 2015). We hope that our study will highlight the invaluable insight teachers have, not only about the challenges they face but also about potential policy solutions. Furthermore, we hope this research can be used to inform both policymakers and practitioners of the contemporary challenges and opportunities in rural K-12 education.

Contemporary Challenges for K-12 Education

Public K-12 schools face a myriad of challenges which contribute to overall school climate and culture and ultimately negatively impact student achievement. General problems that schools, and in particular rural schools, are facing include extremely impoverished student populations, teacher shortages, a lack of adequate funding, inequitable accountability measures, learning loss due to COVID-19, and lack of reliable broadband access (Darling-Hammond & Podolsky, 2019; Fontana et al., 2022; Garcia & Weiss, 2019; Lavalley, 2018). Despite a large proportion, one-fifth, of the U. S. public school population attending rural schools (White House Rural Council 2011; NCES, 2016, Johnson et al., 2022) and about half of all school districts being located in rural areas (Johnson, et al., 2022), rural school voices are often overlooked when determining school policy (Johnson, et al., 2022). Lavalley (2018) suggests that there are two primary reasons for focusing on urban and suburban challenges. First, most students are educated in urban or suburban schools, thus it is hypothesized that policy makers choose to focus their efforts where they perceive the

largest impact can be made. Likewise, rural schools are not distributed equally across states resulting in many states not seeing the need to address rural education issues. This oversight of rural school needs often leads to a “one size fits all” approach which ignores the uniqueness of rural schools (Silverman, 2005).

Poverty and Funding

“Not only is child poverty experienced at higher rates in rural areas, it is also experienced as deep poverty more frequently than in urban areas” meaning a child’s family income falls below half of the poverty line (Lavalley, 2018, p.4). Although it is easiest to assume poverty affects all school children in the same manner, researchers assert that this is a false assumption. The experience of growing up in poverty manifests differently depending on geographic location. Urban students experience environmental stresses such as increased air and noise pollution and substandard housing options while rural students experience geographic isolation marked by limited access to community resources such as hospitals, libraries, museums, and public transportation (Pendola, et al., 2022). The region known as the Alabama Black Belt, named for the rich black soil, has been compared to a third world country and is characterized by extreme poverty, food deserts, and a lack of running water, electricity and functioning sewage systems (Ballesteros, 2017). When students do not have their basic needs met, they struggle to succeed academically. Data from Alabama school districts with high levels of generational poverty demonstrate an association with low student achievement, while more affluent school districts are associated with above average student achievement (Pendola, et al., 2022). Poverty can have significant negative effects on students as children growing up in poverty often lack access to books in the home, do not receive regular healthcare or have access to nutritional foods. This triad places children at risk of delayed language development, health related issues, a lack of social and cognitive development, and increased behavioral issues collectively resulting in lower student achievement (Pendola, et al., 2022; Krashen, 2011; Sanchez, 2021).

Rural school districts typically receive lower funding due to smaller school enrollments and funding structures which rely on the local tax base to supplement school budgets (Darling-Hammond & Podolsky, 2019). With low enrollments in small rural districts, the per pupil funding formula does not adequately cover fixed expenses such as administrator and teacher salaries and building maintenance. Additionally, due to the isolated nature of rural schools, transportation costs are often exorbitant (Silverman, 2005). Meeting the fixed budgetary demands leaves little room in the budget for building repairs, course materials, laboratory supplies, and enrichment experiences, thereby directly impacting student achievement.

Teacher Shortages

Teacher shortages have impacted schools nationwide, but rural schools have suffered the shortages more than most. Teacher shortages are problematic because a “lack of sufficient, qualified teachers and staff instability threatens students’ ability to learn and reduce teachers’ effectiveness, and high teacher turnover consumes economic resources that could be better deployed elsewhere” (Garcia & Weiss, 2019, p. 1). Solutions to the teacher shortage can be grouped into two distinct categories, recruiting and retention.

Recruiting teachers, especially rural school teachers, is negatively impacted by low salaries. Historically, salaries for teachers have been less than workers in professions with similar

education requirements making the teaching profession much less attractive (Garcia & Weiss, 2019). Schools that are better equipped to provide higher salaries are more likely to attract better qualified and more experienced teachers, leaving schools with high concentrations of low income students, minority students, or schools located in rural areas with fewer qualified teachers to fill vacancies (Garcia & Weiss, 2019; Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019; Darling-Hammond & Podolsky, 2019). Many states have turned to “grow your own” and shortened pathways to teacher certification in an effort to increase the supply of teachers; however, the impact of these alternative certification routes is yet to be determined. It has been shown that alternatively certified teachers are more often employed in high poverty or high minority school districts and leave the profession at greater rates than their traditionally certified counterparts (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019).

Retaining experienced teachers in the profession is the second facet of the teacher shortage. Schools invest time and money into teacher professional development that cannot be recouped when teachers leave the field. Working conditions such as large class sizes, little planning time, lack of administrative support, and student discipline often leaves teachers turning away from the classroom (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019; Garcia & Weiss, 2019). To successfully fight the teacher shortage, we must find a means of stemming the flow of teachers choosing to exit the profession.

Broadband Access

Because of their distance from centralized hubs and lower population density, rural areas lack reliable broadband, putting them at a significant disadvantage (Williams & Grooms, 2015; Ford, 2018). Despite assistance through locally and nationally established programs, broadband inequity has continued during the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, a study conducted by researchers at the PEW Research center revealed that though rural residents “have seen a 9 percentage point rise in home broadband adoption since 2016”, they continue to have reduced access to broadband in their homes as compared to their urban and suburban counterparts (Vogels, 2021, para. 2).

Inequitable access to broadband can put rural students at a significant disadvantage. Students who lack, or have reduced, access to, broadband services at home are less able to complete work requiring the internet outside of school hours. For example, these students may not be able to complete homework, or access synchronous lessons on “virtual learning” days (Graves et al., 2021). Fortuitously, increasing broadband availability and access has been a policy priority, especially after the pandemic. Government intervention to adopt expanded access to high-speed broadband results in increased economic growth and improved labor (OECD, 2011), better communications within and between countries (Sumari et al., 2006), increased employments and population growth, and more opportunities for those living in rural communities (Nirmalathas, 2016; Picot, 2007). Initiatives for closing the digital gap for students in need include Bring Your Own Device programs, the free WiFi movement (Fuentes-Bautista & Inagaki, 2006), partnering with local businesses, colleges, or churches to offer high-speed Internet to communities (Bolkan, 2016), and monetary government intervention (Ontario Catholic School Trustees' Association, 2017).

Accountability

In 2001, the federal government reauthorized the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) through the passage of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) (which was replaced by ESSA in 2015). NCLB brought increased attention to student achievement, especially for students who have faced historic disadvantages. In an effort to ensure that all students were being well-served by their schools, the policy focused on accountability measures that could be used to help identify schools that were in need of improvement (Forte, 2010).

According to the Erwin et al. (2021) “school accountability systems can serve many purposes, including sharing information, measuring progress toward state and local goals, and supporting greater educational equity” (para. 1). Still, the reliance on high stakes testing that is associated with contemporary accountability systems is often criticized; suggesting that there is room for improvement in our current accountability strategies. This need for improvement is especially clear for rural schools for whom the cost of developing data-systems for accountability purposes is high (Carrier & Whaland, 2017), and the results of standardized tests are not always valued by parents (Woodrum, 2004).

COVID-19 Learning Loss

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted all aspects of “normal” daily life, and education was no exception. Schools were not exempt when the federal and state governments issued “shut-downs”, and thus teachers and students were forced to adapt quickly to distance learning. Though school administrators and teachers worked quickly and tirelessly to respond to unprecedented changes, we have since seen that there is largely no substitute for in-person learning at the K-12 level. Challenges associated with distance learning include a lack of the tools (ex. broadband, laptop, tablet) needed to connect to virtual learning platforms, a lack of motivation to “log in” and complete virtual work, limited support from parents at home, and isolation to name a few (Dorn et al., 2020; Margolius et al., 2020; Tirado, 2021). Because of this, we have seen evidence of “COVID-19 learning-loss” (Dorn et al., 2020; Kuhfeld et al., 2020) and an increase in mental health issues in students (Margolius et al., 2020), both of which present new challenges for our schools.

Methods

Multiple Case Study Research Design

In this study, we used a multiple case study design in which we treat each of our eight participants as their own case. All participants were teachers in rural, Alabama schools. Case study research, which is useful for examining complex, real-life scenarios, is appropriate for the timely research questions asked in this study (Patten, 2018). Furthermore, the case study approach is particularly suited to help researchers explain “contemporary circumstances,” in our case the contemporary challenges faced by rural schools (Yin, 2017).

After we conducted our focus group meetings, our data analysis strategy proceeded in three steps. First, we compiled and reviewed the transcripts of our conversations with each of the eight teachers. Next, we conducted a within-case thematic analysis for each individual participant, where we looked for and coded themes in their discussions. After coding the data from each individual

case, we used a thematic analysis to look for patterns across cases. In the sections to follow, we will provide additional details about our participants and the data collection process followed by our findings which highlight the most prominent patterns found by our data analysis process.

Data Collection

For this study, focus groups were used as the primary method of data collection. Prior to the full focus group sessions, the lead researcher met with each participant individually to introduce the research and build a rapport. These short introductory meetings served to ensure that all participants understood (1) the purpose of the project, (2) the ways in which data would be used, (3) that their privacy would be protected, and (4) what was expected of participants. The meetings also allowed the lead researcher to poll participants' availability for meetings, preferred meeting durations, and background characteristics.

Following the individual meetings with each participant, the lead researcher began planning for the four upcoming focus group meetings. Each focus group meeting took place on Zoom and was scheduled to last 1.5 hours. Dates for meetings were determined after polling participants' availability. The lead researcher served as the facilitator for all meetings. Approximately one week before each focus group session, the lead researcher distributed a list of broad topics/questions that would be covered in the upcoming meeting. Focus groups were organized around four themes – federal policy, state policy, local policy, and community partnerships – and the topics discussed in each meeting had a direct tie to the theme. While each focus group meeting asked questions about researcher-selected policy issues, there was always an opportunity for participants to discuss alternate policy issues that they saw as important or influential. In this way, sessions were guided by the facilitator, but allowed for participant led discussion as well.

Data from the focus group sessions were collected in two primary ways. First, with permission from participants, the Zoom sessions were recorded to allow for transcription. Secondly, the lead researcher and focus group facilitator took notes during the focus group sessions. Meeting transcripts were used to supplement the researcher's notes with participant quotes and to ensure that all notes accurately reflected the sessions. Both sources were utilized during the thematic analysis process.

Though all efforts were made to schedule meetings at times when all participants were available, participants did miss meetings at times. Last minute schedule conflicts, family emergencies, and illness were the top reasons for missed meetings. When this occurred, the lead researcher offered alternate individual meetings or the option to submit thoughts on paper.

Participants

In total, eight rural teachers from seven rural schools were recruited to participate in this research study as members of a "Rural Teacher Caucus". Caucus members were paid a small stipend for their time. The researchers used purposive sampling to select participants who were expected to be knowledgeable about the impacts of public policy on their schools. Participants were all recruited through their connections with the University of West Alabama as past students in either graduate or undergraduate programs. Diversity was prioritized in the selection of participants.

The research participants were from two racial groups—75% identified as White and 25%

identified as Black. The majority (62.5%) of participants identified as female, while 37.5% identified as male. Participants also had diverse educational specialties. Three participants were special education teachers, two were elementary school teachers, and three were secondary school teachers. Six of the eight participants taught at traditional public schools, and two taught at a public charter school. Participants' schools were located in seven rural school districts and six rural counties. See Table 1 for additional details about the participants.

Table 1: Participant Overview

Name	Gender	Race	Grade Level Taught	Subject Taught	County
Sharon	Female	White	Middle/High	English	Monroe
Wendy	Female	White	High	Special Education	Jackson
Marie	Female	White	Middle	English	Fayette
Bethany	Female	White	Elementary	Elementary Ed	Marengo
Simone	Female	Black	Elementary	Elementary Ed	Sumter
Greg	Male	White	Middle	Social Studies	Sumter
Malcolm	Male	White	Elementary	Special Education	Pickens
Allen	Male	Black	Middle	Special Education	Marengo

Note: Pseudonyms were used to protect the privacy of participants.

Location

Each of the teachers that participated in our study worked in rural Alabama schools at the time of study. While the majority of the teachers who participated in our study taught in the Black Belt region of Alabama, we had teachers from north and south Alabama as well. Alabama is an important state in which to study rural education issues because over 80% of the state's counties are considered rural, and nearly half of all Alabama residents live in rural areas (Alabama Department of Public Health, 2021). Furthermore, because Alabama has historically been one of the lowest performers in education (US World News Report, 2021), it is important that more researchers focus on educational issues in the state.

Compared to the rest of the United States, Alabama residents experience poverty at higher rates, have reduced access to broadband and computers, and are less educated (United States Census Bureau, 2022). In the Black Belt, these inequities are even more stark, as it is one of the poorest and most racially isolated regions in the country (Mann & Rogers, 2021; Wimberly et al., 2014). The participants in our study came from schools in some of the most high-need areas of the state of Alabama and country as a whole.

Findings

We began this study with a desire to learn about the contemporary challenges and opportunities for rural schools, as described by rural teachers. Specifically, we asked teachers to discuss how policies developed at the local, state, and federal levels affect their schools, and what improvements could be made to ensure that public policies better serve our rural schools. This exploration is important for two reasons. First, it allowed us to learn more about how policies, which are often created by policymakers with an “urban” mindset, affect rural schools (Arsen et al., 2021; Dulgrian, 2016; Gagnon & Mattingly, 2015; Weiss, 2019). Secondly, it allowed us to discover new, teacher supported, solutions to contemporary challenges. In the sections to follow, we present findings that emerged from a thematic analysis of the data collected over a span of four focus group meetings with our caucus.

Local Policy Challenges and Opportunities

The first focus meeting we held asked our teachers to share their views about local policies that affected their schools. Specifically, we asked the teachers to share (1) which policies, at the district level, were particularly successful, (2) which policies, at the district level, needed the most improvement, and (3) what ideas they had for either improving existing policy or creating new policies. The eight caucus members worked in seven different school districts, allowing for substantial variation in local policy contexts.

At the local level, we found that the majority of challenges reported by our caucus fell under two key themes—technology/broadband access and pandemic-related learning loss. While expanded broadband access, as a policy issue, is often supported by federal and state governments, it is still tied to specific locales. Furthermore, the teachers who participated in our study revealed that at the district-level, access to the type, age, and amount of technology varied greatly. For example, two of the seven schools our caucus members represented lacked 1:1 technology for students, with one school “not even having enough technology for the teachers”. Of the schools that had 1:1 technology, most allowed students to take their devices (typically Chromebooks) home; however, one school required devices to be kept in the classroom. While keeping devices on school property limits students’ abilities to use them for homework, it may be an ideal strategy to prevent damaged devices, which one teacher noted was a challenge.

The combination of limited access to devices and reliable, speedy broadband connections created a large roadblock to virtual learning during the pandemic. Three of the eight teachers we met with reported that the choice to go virtual during the pandemic led to significant learning loss for their students. They reported that this was, at least in part, due to a lack of enforceable policies to ensure that students selecting virtual instruction actually logged on and completed their work. Allen reported that his school struggled significantly with students who “chose virtual but never logged on”. Ultimately, this resulted in students being “up to 1.5 years behind” in their learning. While this amount of learning loss is troubling, the teachers we worked with recommended several viable strategies that could be used to mitigate learning loss. Largely, their recommendations were tied to successful school or district level interventions that they had observed. Three teachers shared in-school interventions that worked for their students, while three shared interventions that took place outside of normal school hours. Some schools used a combination of the two. Their in-school recommended interventions for COVID-19 learning loss included: 30 minute intervention blocks, full period intervention blocks, and even full intervention days during the regular school

week. In terms of interventions that take place outside of normal school hours, teachers suggested summer and weekend intervention programs. More intensive intervention programs were used by schools with higher levels of learning loss; suggesting that schools and districts consider the level of learning loss when designing intervention programs.

State Policy Challenges and Opportunities

In our second focus group meeting, we asked the participating teachers to share how current Alabama policies have affected their schools, and what recommendations they have for state policy reform. In reference to state level challenges, two themes were clearly identified – challenges related to the teacher shortage and those related to standardized testing. The theme of the teacher shortage was especially strong in our caucus’ discussion of state level challenges, as it affected each of the schools represented by our participants, albeit in different ways.

Specifically, the teachers we met with expressed concern over the use of long-term subs, emergency certified teachers, uncertified teachers, and a lack of aides and substitutes. Each of these factors was said to be problematic for different reasons. For example, a lack of substitutes was said to contribute to burnout; whereas the overuse of emergency certified teachers was said to be discouraging to teachers who had “paid their dues” and “put in the time and money” to get certified. In those schools where getting certified teachers was a persistent problem, our participants lamented that this negatively affected their students. For example, Sharon shared that her school had only three certified teachers for grades 7-12, while Allen added that his school had not had a certified math or English teacher in at least two years.

While the teacher shortage has been well-researched (Garcia & Weiss, 2019; Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019; Darling-Hammond & Podolsky, 2019), we believe that our study offers valuable insights into ways that it can be alleviated. Teacher retention and recruitment in rural areas must be a priority, and we believe that current teachers are a perfect source to consult on teacher retention strategies. Rural schools are often underfunded, and thus rural teachers are often underpaid (Tieken & Montgomery, 2021). One of the most obvious solutions to this problem, which can affect both recruitment and retention, would be to raise teacher salaries. Unfortunately, this solution has proven to be easier said than done. Understanding that, the teachers who participated in our study offered some more creative solutions that could be levied to improve rural teacher recruitment and retention rates.

One of the most popular suggestions was that the state offer improved benefits such as sick leave, mental health days, and maternity/paternity leave. Bethany shared that she was only able to take 20 days of maternity leave, of which only 11 were paid. Malcom suggested that “mental health days” be added to the typical time-off benefits, as a way to ensure that teachers can take time to re-set when they become overwhelmed and begin to experience symptoms of burn-out. Finally, multiple teachers expressed dissatisfaction with the removal of paid COVID-19 leave when the teachers continue to be exposed to the virus in their classrooms.

While the first two solutions offered by our participants would likely benefit rural and urban teachers alike, our participants also shared some creative, rural-specific solutions. First, Simone suggested that when hiring new teachers, administrators “look for people who want to stay rural”. Building on that, Malcom recommended that administrators make a point to “sell” their area to new hires, highlighting what makes it special. Finally, assistance for housing was another

important rural-specific suggestion. Overall, the teachers we met with expressed a shared sentiment that rural schools would benefit from recruiting teachers who are open to and excited about being part of a rural community.

In addition to these concerns about and suggestions for the teacher shortage at the state-level, the teachers we spoke with also identified state standardized testing requirements as a major challenge. Sharon spoke for the group, saying, “we are all tired of ACAP standardized testing”. Teachers revealed that they felt pressured to “teach to the test” over other important content. Additionally, they expressed concern that testing was being started too early.

Unfortunately, there were no easy solutions to the challenges that standardized testing brings, as the teachers we spoke to did not see any clear and better alternatives. It is possible that in the case of testing, solutions should be levied at reducing teacher stress and increasing flexibility in prep-requirements. One potential way to do this would be to move “test prep” outside of the regular classroom schedule, for example by creating a test prep period or providing weekend test-prep sessions.

Federal Policy Challenges and Opportunities

During the third focus group meeting, we asked the teachers present to share their views on major federal education policies and their impacts. The results to follow started as a discussion of federal education policy; however, it is important to note that some policy actions and suggestions may also relate to local and state policymaking, as it is often up to states and at times local districts to interpret and implement federal education policies.

When asked to share what major challenges related to federal policy their schools faced, the teachers we met with largely focused on challenges associated with accountability and the grading of schools. Federal pushes for accountability through No Child Left Behind, and now the Every Student Succeeds Act, have sparked the practice of “grading” schools. While the teachers we spoke with all acknowledged the value of accountability measures; many reported that they felt their school’s “grades” were not reflective of the successes their students and faculty have seen. Sharon shared that “90% of students at her school go on to pursue a trade, rather than a college degree”, in part because her school has a strong CTE program. Unfortunately, this success is not reflected in her school’s grade or standardized testing scores. One solution offered up and supported by the teachers who participated in our study was that we take a more holistic approach when grading schools. Such a change would likely be especially beneficial for rural schools, where career readiness is a big focus.

Another interesting point that came from our focus group discussions of federal education policy intersected directly with our previous discussion of the teacher shortage. Wendy said it best when she mused, “How do we up student standards and lower teacher standards at the same time?”. This comment further cements the need for new strategies for addressing the teacher shortage by recruiting and retaining highly qualified teachers in high-need areas, such as rural schools.

Community Partnerships

At the conclusion of this project, we held one final focus group meeting to ask our participants how community partners could contribute to the alleviation of the challenges their schools are currently facing. In rural areas, schools are often a pillar of the community, and as the saying goes, “it takes a village”. One major community partnership resource that was identified during

our focus group sessions was regional universities. Regional universities, especially those located in rural areas, may be particularly suited to assist rural schools; however, they must take up the call to serve their neighboring K-12 schools through the development of strong partnerships.

Discussion

We approached this project with a desire to learn about contemporary challenges and opportunities in rural Alabama schools, as identified by rural Alabama teachers. The teachers we met with shared that some of the largest challenges their schools currently face include limited access to broadband and technology, COVID-19 related learning loss, increased stress associated with standardized testing, a shortage of highly qualified teachers and substitutes, and dissatisfaction with current accountability measures. Ultimately these challenges are ones that affect both rural and urban schools alike; however, it is important to remember that the uniqueness of the rural setting can cause urban-centric policies to be ineffective for rural schools, thereby necessitating specialized rural policy solutions.

While we hope our findings will prove relevant outside of the state of Alabama, we understand that our methods and research design do limit the generalizability of our findings. Because of this, we encourage others to replicate our methods in new places, with new groups of teachers. We argue that when policy makers begin to think of rural-centric solutions, they should take the time to consult with rural teachers, who can provide invaluable insight. The solutions shared by the rural teachers who participated in our study represent only the tip of the iceberg. Still, they are important because they shed light on feasible solutions that could help address the contemporary challenges rural schools face. In the future, continued discussions with rural teachers that dive deeper into individual challenges and opportunities will be an excellent resource.

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Rooted in Appalachia: Empowering Rural Students to Envision & Enact Possible Selves in Postsecondary Education

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Abstract

Scholarship underscores the experiences of Appalachian students who must confront a social reality that consistently expects less from them because of their circumstances and the narratives surrounding their social context (Collins, 2020; Piene et al., 2020). Traditionally, the Appalachian people have been viewed by educators from a deficit approach although some theorists are transitioning to see the value in Appalachian people and, using this alternative lens, are approaching the Appalachian identity with more place-based pedagogies such as funds of knowledge (Collins, 2020; Piene et al., 2020). These culturally responsive approaches see value in the region's people and scaffolds a positive learning environment on the cultural heritages and identities of the region and allows students to expand their views of possible selves. In turn, this contribution explores the pedagogical approaches embodied in possible selves as a theory that builds on rural and small community assets and successes as related to the social resources and capital that rural students represent. Specifically, we look at the connections that possible selves as a theory makes to rural students' socioeconomic, sociocultural, and sociohistorical contexts and how this theory can accentuate concepts like social capital with respect to postsecondary student success.

Keywords: deficit thinking, possible selves, Appalachia, rural students

Introduction

Appalachian students often face barriers and challenges in academia that stem from stereotype threats that are exacerbated by pedagogical frameworks reliant on deficit thinking. Known as being from the cradle of poverty, Appalachian students face uphill battles when it comes to academic success, stemming from a lack of resources, a deficit of trained teachers, and cultural misunderstandings of the attributes that make the area unique (Adams, 2017; Collins, 2020). In accordance, scholarship underscores the experiences of Appalachian students who must confront a social reality that consistently expects less from them because of their circumstances and the narratives surrounding their social context (Collins, 2020; Piene et al., 2020). Understanding the demographic mosaics, cultural nuances, and social and cultural attributes that elevate and characterize the area known as Appalachia is one step toward reinventing the narrative for students of this area – understanding the pedagogical theories that educators can use to create and facilitate these opportunities is yet another.

In this contribution, we explore the pedagogical approaches embodied in possible selves

as a theory that build on rural and small community assets and successes as related to the social resources and capital that rural students represent. Specifically, we look at the connections that possible selves as a theory makes to rural students' socioeconomic, sociocultural, and sociohistorical contexts and how this theory can accentuate concepts like social capital with respect to postsecondary student success. As part of this connection, we couple critical placed-based learning and notions of social and cultural capital as central to leveraging possible selves theory as an approach to elevating Appalachia students' experiences in academia.

By centering our focus on rural students' experiences in Appalachia, we make connections to how these pedagogical efforts, in relationship to community-based networks and systems, help to address self-limiting beliefs toward postsecondary achievements (Rosecrance et al., 2019). Further, we emphasize how these pedagogical approaches can become a comprehensive effort to shed light on the inconsistencies of rural disadvantage narratives and the role that deficit thinking has on the persistence of rural students in postsecondary education. Rural institutions, especially those in Appalachia, thus may find opportunity and the capacity of hope in leveraging theories like the ones featured in this contribution as they aim to center experiences from unique social contexts as anchors for reinvention and social change (Anderson, 2010; Rosecrance et al., 2019). Additionally, in highlighting how these theories can be leveraged to change the narrative around rural Appalachia, there exists the opportunity for teachers and educational leaders to recognize the challenges and the tools needed to disrupt barriers that continue to influence rural public institutions and students.

Sociohistorical Context of Appalachia

Characteristics of Appalachia

In the story of postsecondary enrollment, persistence, and success, the narrative has emphasized a rural disadvantage wherein challenges including lower socioeconomic status (SES), lower parental expectations, and fewer opportunities for college preparation in high school has made it challenging for rural students to compete with their nonrural peers (Byun et al., 2012; Chambers et al., 2019). This has been exacerbated by the consistent trend of teacher attrition in rural K-12 schools, lower quality resources in rural schools, and the lack of access to comprehensive postsecondary counseling in rural high schools (Chambers et al., 2019; Means, 2017). This is certainly the case in rural Appalachia where there still exists a significant gap in terms of key economic factors including low high school graduation rates, low per capita income, and high poverty which varies across the vast region (Appalachian Regional Commission [ARC], 2022). In particular, graduation with a bachelor's degree in rural Appalachian areas is almost half that of the national average (Pollard & Jacobsen, 2017; Rosecrance et al., 2019; U.S. Census Bureau, 2016). Students in rural Appalachia also disproportionately have first-generation status with particular barriers to access related to social resources and capital (Rosecrance et al., 2019).

For any discussion of education in Appalachia, it is important to begin with the historical and sociological context. Appalachia is a vast, diverse region consisting of 423 counties across thirteen states from New York to Mississippi (ARC, 2022b). While Appalachia is most often portrayed as a homogenous region with negative cultural characteristics that impede its development, Appalachia is a diverse region with a rich culture. Of the over 26 million individuals living in the Appalachian region, 10.2% are African American, 5.8% are Hispanic/Latino, 4.2% Other, and 79.8% White are other racial and/or ethnic groups (ARC, 2022b). Even though the diversity of the

region is below that of the rest of the United States, it is growing. While the African American population is currently the largest racialized group within the region, the Hispanic/Latino is the fastest growing racialized group within the region (ARC, 2022b). The diversity of the region varies as well by sub-region (i.e. Northern, Central, and Southern Appalachia) and even by county.

Appalachia is a land rich in natural resources, but with high poverty rates and low investment in the education of its people (Caretta et al., 2022; Gaventa, 2018; Haynes, 1997; Partridge et al., 2013). Outside corporate interests—particularly that of extractive industries—have taken precedence over that of its citizens throughout its history, whether it be traditional mining, mountaintop removal, or oil and gas extraction (Caretta et al., 2022; Gaventa, 2018; Haynes, 1997). As such, this prioritization has led to a lower level of education funding for Appalachia throughout the years.

Overall, research has found that high levels of natural resource extraction leads to lower per capita income, higher poverty, and more social inequality (Mueller, 2020). Even though the region has seen a stark decline in mining in recent years, the history of dependency on extractive industries continues to take its toll on the region (Schwartzman, 2021). Much of the remaining mining implemented occurs through especially environmentally devastating methods—including mountaintop removal—and employs few workers (Gaventa, 2018). In addition, the decline of mining has led to a decrease of funding for schools and subsequently a decline in K-12 enrollment in an already impoverished area with an underfunded education system (Murray & Schaeffer, 2018). Similar to its dependence on mining, the region has been disproportionately impacted by a decline in manufacturing (Mueller, 2020) with the region historically being heavily dependent on lower wage manufacturing (Haynes, 1997), which has experienced a more rapid decline. Appalachia is not unique in that rural areas throughout the world have experienced a sense of marginalization compared to urban areas, with rural areas in general being perceived as culturally, socially, and economically inferior to their urban counterparts (Peine et al., 2020).

Social Identity in Appalachia

While much has been written about the Appalachian culture, most of it is written by outsiders from a culture of poverty lens that blames the poverty of the region on its culture (Gaventa, 2018). In contrast, the Appalachian Studies Association presents an alternative perspective of Appalachia and is more closely aligned with identities of possibilities of Appalachia that emphasizes the positive potential of the region's cultures that includes the connections to community, family, and place. It is also important to not fall into the trap of characterizing the region as a static, monolithic, other culture but rather to acknowledge the diverse cultures (e.g., Black, Latinx, Indigenous) within the region (Catte, 2018; Turner & Cabbell, 1985) and those cultures are socially constructed and change over time. While acknowledging that culture is socially constructed and that there are various social identities in Appalachia, reclaiming Appalachian identity as a positive social construct can have both a positive impact on the individual and also their ability to positively identify with others and impact their communities (Smith et al., 2010).

Appalachians were first perceived as a sense of “otherness” by the “local color” writers in the 1800s (Haynes, 1997) and occurred simultaneously with the efforts to acquire the rights to the timber and coal in the region. The cultural stereotypes of the region have transitioned to that of the “Hillbilly” in a more modern era. While outsiders often view the region through these stereotypical lenses, it is important to note that researchers have found that most Appalachians do not self-identify as Appalachian (Cooper et al., 2011). Obermiller and Mahoney (2016) suggest that rather

than a focus on Appalachian culture, a more effective approach is to focus on the needs and priorities in Appalachian communities and how to meet those needs and priorities. Simultaneously, Obermiller and Mahoney (2016) purport that it is important to focus on Appalachian identities (interpretation of their lived experiences through social, economic, and political forces) without focusing on the more problematic concept of Appalachian culture while also centering on the possible Appalachian futures.

Characteristics of Education in Appalachia

The lack of funding for education makes it difficult to recruit teachers and, once recruited, there is often a disconnect in Appalachia. While most students in the region come from low income, rural backgrounds, their teachers tend to come from middle class, urban or suburban backgrounds (Hendrickson, 2012). This socioeconomic gap between teachers and students leads to less effective relationships between students and teachers and a reduced sense of belonging, which in turn can reduce engagement with school for Appalachian students (Hendrickson, 2012).

With many of the students in Appalachia being first-generation college students, they are less likely to be mentored by their family for college success (Hendrickson, 2012). Similarly, because of the depressed economies in their communities, they are less likely to envision as many possible employment options. Between the disconnect with teachers and being first-generation college students in communities with few employment opportunities for college educated populations, Appalachian students face additional challenges and barriers. Many may not envision college as even a possibility. In West Virginia (the only state totally within Appalachia) research found that only 26 percent of first-generation college students were considering college in elementary school compared to 53 percent of non-first-generation college students (Noland, 2011).

Traditionally, the Appalachian people have been viewed by educators from a deficit approach. Although some theorists are transitioning to see the value in Appalachian people and using this alternative lens are approaching the Appalachian identity through place-based pedagogies such as funds of knowledge (Collins, 2020; Piene et al., 2020). These culturally responsive approaches see value in the region's people and scaffold a positive learning environment on the cultural heritages and identities of the region and allows students to expand their views of possible selves.

Challenges and Barriers

The Bed of Poverty

In the 1960s, the Central Broadcasting Station (CBS) released a show called *The Beverly Hillbillies*, which followed a humble family from the Ozarks as they moved to Beverly Hills, California, after becoming affluent through oil. The show featured the family as backwards, not aligned with California, or modern values, and was highly successful due to the humor propagated by these perceptions (Cooke-Jackson & Hensen, 2008). Reflective of the same stereotypes, more recently the same production agency proposed a reality television series which would follow a poor, Appalachian family to California entitled *The Real Beverly Hillbillies* (Cooke-Jackson & Hensen, 2008). The difference: Appalachian advocacy groups became outraged and warned of the issues and potential harms resulting from the propagation of negative stereotypes in Appalachia.

Adams (2017) points out that this type of stereotyping is often embedded with the thought of Appalachia being a bed of poverty - the epicenter of a generations-long war on poverty by U.S.

Presidents, charity groups, and entertainment companies alike. According to Adams (2017) political “poverty tours,” persistent gaps in educational attainment in the area, and the stigma of being from the region may exacerbate students’ abilities to persist in academia or the industrial sector. Adding to the likes of these types of reality series, Adams (2017) comments that documentaries like “A Hidden America: Children of the Mountains” and “Can President Trump Win the War on Poverty,” released in 2009 and 2017 respectively, continue to propagate the narrative of Appalachia as a backwards, dirty place stuck in the past (ABC News, 2009). Decades of being labeled as backwards can, in turn, easily overpower narratives attributed to the academic abilities, individual characteristics, and persistence traits displayed by students from Appalachia (Gorski, 2012; Smith, 2019).

Fraley (2007) painted this picture most effectively in her description of the American public consciousness of Appalachia - as a place devastated by mining companies, a place laid to waste, entrenched by generations of backward thinking and condescension; not the vacation spot that most Americans would want to save. As she puts it, “Dirty children, Moonshine bottles on the porch. Collapsing shacks. Appalachia is a place to escape from, not a place to live” (Fraley, 2007, p. 365). This type of negative depiction of Appalachia typically outshines the hardworking efforts of locals and rural natives that have struggled to advance not only positive images of Appalachia - a region which houses the greatest biodiversity in North America- but also the protection of the region as a whole (Fraley, 2007; Cooke-Jackson & Hansen, 2008).

A Bunch of Hillbillies

Thus, an additional challenge for Appalachian college students are the stereotypes that they face as representatives of the region, both in applying to, and within, college. Scholarship indicates that students from rural Appalachia often experience stereotype threats which derive from negative perceptions of the region, like the ones depicted above, and, in turn, influences their postsecondary success (Smith, 2019). As marginalized individuals in higher education, either they face the dilemma of acknowledging that they are Appalachian and risk being stereotyped or deny their Appalachian heritage and not confront the stereotypes (Tennant, 2022).

Brown and Pinel (2003) for example underscored the development of the perception of discrimination in terms of the visibility of an identity. In their findings, Brown and Pinel (2003) found that it was easier for adolescents to identify discrimination based on a visually-explicit identity (e.g., gender, race, etc.) than a non-visual identity (e.g., political beliefs). In terms of Appalachia students, this type of discrimination often manifests in the form of their accents, cultural markers, or socioeconomic status - characteristics which students are motivated to shed in an attempt to shape their identity and confirm to a sense of belonging aligned with secondary ideals of success (Adams, 2017; Smith 2019). The opposite effect, the internalization of stereotypes, has also been documented in Appalachian youths, especially in the context of being poor, illiterate, and uneducated. According to Adams (2017), “If exposed on numerous occasions to this stereotype over time, Appalachian youth might begin to disidentify with Appalachian culture, or with literacy and education, and become less interested and concerned with academic performance” (p. 12).

Thus, a challenge for many is how to embrace their cultural identity without being viewed as having cultural deficits because of others’ stereotypes of people from the region. Adams’ (2017) study provides insight into how youth from Appalachian contend with this dichotomy. According to a male, senior, high school student in her study, growing up in an Appalachian county it became

imperative for him to both love his hometown as well as break the stereotype of the region through persistent academic performance and high pressure to “[break] the stereotype that we’re all a bunch of incest, drug-addicted hillbillies” (Adams, 2017, p. 23). For most students, Appalachia is both a place and culture, with stereotype threat becoming apparent in the disparities of how they are treated outside of the region, access to resources while inside the region, and availability of support to continue postsecondary education (Adams, 2017; Helton, 2010; Smith, 2019).

Further, to support this claim, according to a recent study by Rittenour and colleagues (2020), perceptions of Appalachia culture are often intertwined with public perceptions of the area. For example, open-ended responses from a survey of American MTurk workers in their study represented an array of positive (e.g., self-reliant, kind, mountain dwelling) and negative (e.g., backwards, uneducated, poor, prejudiced) perceptions. Despite more positive responses on the close-ended questions (i.e., depictions of Appalachians as warm), the scholars found that previous contact with Appalachia did not yield significant differences in attitudes towards the region (Rittenour et al., 2020). Winter (2013) found that even many pre-service teachers from Appalachia who planned to teach in the region failed to identify as Appalachian and harbored many of the negative stereotypes about the region and their future students.

Deficit Thinking and Pedagogy

These stereotype threats often arise in tandem with deficit thinking that emphasizes the limitations of rural Appalachian students based on perceptions of being lazy, unmotivated, and backwards (Gibbins et al., 2019; Gorski, 2010). Valencia (1997) suggests that deficit thinking is the perspective that students from marginalized and minoritized communities perform poorly in schools based on internal deficits related to their families and communities instead of structural inequalities. Deficit thinking frameworks often utilize strategies that blame the victim for any failures, emphasizing shortcomings based on stereotypes that perpetuate the status quo of a traditionally marginalized community rather than acknowledge the barriers within the institution that hinder success (Hurd et al., 2018; Kricorian et al., 2020). In the cases of Appalachian students, deficit thinking may be ingrained by the narratives carried in the rural or low socioeconomic status of residents in the area. For example, student academic failure may be blamed on their poverty, backgrounds, culture, or rural residency, exacerbating limitations on students’ academic skills and chances of success without basis (Horn & Nunez, 2000; Swecker et al., 2013). In turn, deficit thinking frameworks may potentially lead teachers to compensate for these “deficits” rather than acknowledge the potential of the characteristics of their students (Hurd et al., 2018).

Teacher education programs rarely prepare teachers to use culturally responsive education approaches for Appalachian students and thus there is an emphasis on deficit thinking which is often even employed by native Appalachian teachers (Collins, 2020). This can also lead teachers to a lack of understanding of the local culture, perpetuation of negative stereotypes, and undervaluing of the contributions of Appalachian students (Hendrickson, 2012). Hendrickson (2012) indicates “Teachers sometimes make assumptions about the students in rural schools, mistakenly attributing poverty to habits associated with poor people and blaming parents and families for living in poverty; some school employees in rural areas trivialize students knowledge and culture with a ‘saving the poor’ attitude toward education” (p. 38).

The question then becomes how to shift from an oppressive educational model that leads to cultural loss (Collins, 2020) and simultaneously inhibits Appalachians from envisioning all possible selves to a pedagogy that empowers the development of a constructive, positive Appalachian

identity. This can then empower Appalachian youth not only to define themselves but to redefine their communities (Peine et al., 2020). Due to the barriers associated with rural Appalachian students' college-going self-efficacy, there is a need for their learning environment to help them develop other possible selves through effective pedagogies.

Pedagogical Approaches

Scholarship has consistently challenged these disadvantaged notions related to rural areas, showing that most educational differences between rural and nonrural students can be attributed to social class rather than elements of stereotypes associated with rural disadvantaged narratives (Means, 2017). Further, rural students often represent the values of their tight-knit families, schools, and communities which often translate to strong social resources aligned with positive youth development and persistence (Byun et al., 2012; Means, 2017). Gibbons and colleagues (2019) argue that,

One group in the U.S. that would benefit from a culturally sensitive adaptation is people living in rural Appalachia. (...) We assert that when working with cultural groups such as rural Appalachians, career counselors and educators must filter career needs through an understanding of community strengths and values before considering how to address individual needs. (par 2-3)

The social resources linked to rural youth are lauded by scholars as necessary instruments to navigate new educational frontiers and the unfamiliarity of academic norms in postsecondary life (Byun et al., 2012). In the following, we explore how different pedagogical approaches, including possible selves theory, critical place-based learning, and social and cultural capital theory, can be leveraged to counter negative Appalachian stereotypes and build positive narratives around Appalachian student success.

Possible Selves

Theories, like possible selves, emphasize the importance of the social capital embodied by students and build on rural and small community assets in order to counter deficit thinking (Markus & Nurius, 1986). Possible selves can be defined as “the cognitive manifestation of enduring goals, aspirations, motives, fears, and threats” (Markus & Nurius, 1986, p. 954). Possible selves are anchored in encouraging and enabling a person to envision the person(s) they could become. As such, the conceptualization of possible selves consists of both the person someone seeks to become and the person someone avoids becoming. For instance, possible selves informed by aspirations might include the educated self, the married self, or the compassionate self; on the other hand, possible selves informed by fears might include the ignorant self, the lonely self, or the unhappy self. A person's sociocultural context can influence what is deemed valuable or undesirable (Hamman et al., 2010).

Because they are future-oriented potentialities that are unique and significant to a specific individual at a specific time, possible selves are intimately connected to motivation (Plimmer & Schimdt, 2007). In other words, motivation can be thought of as the bridge between an individual's current self and their future self that is oriented around the realization of goals (Markus & Nurius, 1986). This means that an individual can develop plans and exhibit behaviors—what Oyserman

and colleagues (2004) refer to as roadmaps—that will lead them toward the possible selves they most desire. This can, in turn, provide a roadmap for students that uniquely allows them to integrate positive narratives from their background into their own story of success, catered to their background, beliefs, desires, and motivations.

Research has shown that Appalachian high school students who view college potential as one of their possible selves are more likely to attend college (Chenoweth, 2005). Chenoweth (2005) found that possible selves were a mediating factor between environmental factors (e.g. academic achievement, academic preparation, socio economic factors) and college attendance. While positive possible selves were a mediating factor in college attendance for Appalachian high school students, Chenoweth (2005) found that fear of possible selves such as that of Appalachian stereotypes did not play a role in college attendance.

It is important to consider, then, the role educators at all levels play in this process. To address this inquiry, we offer three pedagogical approaches that can empower rural students to envision and enact possible selves as part of their postsecondary education journeys.

Critical Place-Based Learning

Place-based pedagogy is a contrast to deficit based, culture of poverty approaches to education such as standardization, is place based pedagogy. According to Hayes (2017), is a theory of instruction that advocates situating schools and curriculums within their geographic, social, and cultural surroundings, as a means of improving both student learning and encouraging community sustainability” (paragraph 8). Critical place-based learning involves developing an understanding of the global world through engaging in learning in a local community through a culturally responsive lens with simultaneous goals of educating students and striving for their empowerment to promote positive, culturally sustaining, social change in their communities (Madden, 2016). Often this occurs through problem-based learning in a local context (Madden, 2016). Critical place-based pedagogies connect teachers, students, and communities (Graham, 2007). Students are not perceived as entering the classrooms with a deficit of knowledge and abilities, but rather students are able to build on the skills, values, and knowledge that they bring to the classroom (Hayes, 2017).

Appalachia has played a crucial, historical role in place-based pedagogies and one that has often not been recognized due to stereotypes about Appalachian education and deficit approaches that portray Appalachian education deficits (Hayes, 2017). Place-based pedagogies in Appalachia include the work of John Dewey’s student, Elsie Clapp, the *Foxfire* series, the Highlander Folk School (Hayes, 2017). Using critical place-based pedagogies in Appalachian communities has been demonstrated to have positive impacts on students and their communities (Graham, 2007; Humphreys et al., 2022). These place-based pedagogies can lead to both more positive possible selves but also simultaneously to more inclusive communities for diverse students (Hayes, 2017). Critical place-based pedagogies are currently being employed throughout educational disciplines from writing to art to Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) (Hayes, 2017; Humphreys, et al., 2022; Reeves et al., 2022;). Place-based pedagogies could be particularly effective with Appalachians who do not necessarily identify with an Appalachian culture but do feel a strong connection to a sense of place.

Social and Cultural Capital

Educational scholarship is rich with examples that highlight the relationship between social and cultural capital and student success (Bourdieu, 1973; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Salis Reyes & Nora, 2012). The pith of this scholarship underscores the notion that institutions often hold and represent particular social and cultural norms, standards, or structures within the language they utilize, the relationship they perpetuate, and the value they place on specific ideals, that reify accepted social structures (Anderson, 2010; Bourdieu, 1973; Bourdieu & Passeron, 2000). Social and cultural capital are thus intimately intertwined with the notion of power within the context in which they are used in that they can be used to offer advantages or barriers to those constructing interactions in this space (Giroux, 1997; Hall, 1980). In accordance, within theories that adopt the notions of social and cultural capital, power can be viewed as potentially holding the promise for constructive, as well as destructive, change for both the individual with the capital or the community accruing, or lacking, it (Anderson, 2010).

Such theories also purport the interaction of social and cultural capital as key elements in the social construction of reality. Berger and Luckmann (1991) offer insight to this point by describing the social construction of reality as a phenomenon reflective of an individual's own social contexts, relationships, social interactions, and accepted perceptions. They emphasize that once we,

...act upon this understanding, our common knowledge of reality becomes reinforced. Thus, our symbols and institutions are part of an objective reality. Collective thoughts gradually crystalize from individual habit into institutions, which are supported by language conventions. Eventually, matters are subjectively internalized through the upbringing and formal education of citizens into a particular culture's identity and belief system. (Berger & Luckmann, 1991, p. 24)

The social construction of reality, and the reliance of the use of particular social and cultural capital accepted as the norms of academic institutions, in particular, poses challenges to students that may not fit within these particular frameworks. For Giroux (1997), this situation makes for students to function as a constant "border-crosser, as a person moving in and out of physical, cultural, and social borders" (p. 96).

In this regard, the disparities between academic institutions and rural realities suggest that the social circumstances that Appalachian students must navigate in academia is potentially and inherently different from the one that represents their daily lives (Anderson, 2010; Hurd et al., 2020). However, what these theories offer is that, instead of simply reproducing the stereotype threats associated with their socioeconomic, sociocultural, or sociohistorical characteristics, both social and cultural capital can be reconceptualized to review the Appalachian narrative as positive within their own social reality (Kelley et al., 2023). These theories may help to recognize all the forms of social and cultural capital associated with rural Appalachian students, incorporating the strengths of their community as part of the success in their postsecondary education.

Implications for Appalachian Students

Appalachian college students often face barriers such as lower socioeconomic status and are more likely to be first-generation college students. Like other first-generation college students,

they face new challenges without the reference points from family experiences. In addition, Appalachian college students lack exposure to many professions and professionals in those fields such as STEM (Boynton, 2014). The exposure to these fields is important to their development of possible selves (Gillen et al., 2017). Appalachian students, like other first-generation college students, are often unaware of the unspoken rules for college success (Carrico et al., 2015). For all of these reasons, effective mentoring is especially valuable to Appalachian college students.

Often traditional mentoring takes place from the perspective of asking them to discard their old identities and to invoke a new identity of a successful college student (Kelley et al., 2023, Turnage, 2015). Stemming from a deficit thinking framework, these models adopt the notion of Appalachian characteristics as “backwards” or inadequate to be successful in an academic environment (Adams, 2017). Moreover, as scholarship highlights, the norms, language, and institutional standards adopted by academic institutions often convey messages of who is allowed or accepted at institutions, reproducing certain social structures that reify a social reality of what is conceptualized as academia (Anderson, 2010; Giroux, 1997; Hytten, 1997). Within this reality, Appalachia students often find themselves outside the norm, with social and cultural capital that is potentially deemed inappropriate or incongruent to standard foundations for academic success (Adams, 2017).

However, as the theories presented in this contribution emphasize, a more effective approach would not involve this replacement of identities, but would invoke the merging of the identities into a new positive self-identity where one can be both a first-generation college student from Appalachia and a successful college student (Turnage, 2015). Coupled with critical place-based learning and an understanding of the social and cultural capital inherent within Appalachia, these students can view their Appalachian identity as providing positive social capital (e.g., problem solving, independence, resilience, sense of purpose) to help them succeed in college. Since much of one’s social identity is developed in college, a mentoring program that uses place-based learning to help students develop positive identities can be particularly valuable for Appalachian students and other first-generation college students (Turnage, 2015). What these theories offer students is a potential strategy to reconceptualize the narrative that represents Appalachian. This will feature the characteristics of the community – including a strong family-base, resilience, and resourcefulness—as necessary attributes to Appalachia students success and not deficits to academic trajectories (Adams, 2017; Turnage, 2015).

Conclusion

According to a report for the National Association for College Admissions Counseling, over half of the school districts in the United States are categorized as rural, with over 8.9 million students in attendance (Means, 2017). Appalachia encompasses over thirteen states that comprises several rural regions, including 26 million residents across the majority of the Southeastern United States (ARC, 2022). The presence of rural Appalachian students that are making their way on postsecondary education journeys is therefore not minimal and should not be overlooked when considering national objectives related to student retention, persistence, and attainment. In this contribution, we present possible selves as a way to counter the deficit thinking influencing the disadvantaged narrative of rural Appalachia by elevating the importance of the social capital and resources students from this region bring to postsecondary education. By building on rural and small community assets and successes, possible selves theory produces a narrative supportive of rural students’ growth in and beyond Appalachia. Building supporting the social capital and resources of Appalachian students through highlighting their possible selves we simultaneously open

the door for various possible Appalachian futures (Schwartzman, 2021).

Precautions should be taken not to fall back into blaming an Appalachian “Culture of Poverty” for producing negative possible selves, (Chenoweth, 2005). Similarly, educators should avoid using negative possible selves in terms of fears of being seen as a “Hillbilly” as a tool for change. Care should also be taken not to invoke a static, universal Appalachian culture, but view Appalachia as a place with multiple cultural identities (Obermiller & Maloney, 2016). Possible selves theory should be combined with placed-based pedagogies that invoke positive possible selves for Appalachians combined with positive mentoring and critical pedagogies. This combination can expand Appalachians’ possible selves, lead to more success in higher education, and promote more sustainable communities (Gillen et al., 2017).

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Honoring the Power of Place: Rural Educator Development in Early Childhood & Elementary Education Using a Childcare Apprenticeship Model

Keely O. Baronak & William M. Baronak

Abstract

While historically aligned to skilled labor and trades, and unlike many European nations, apprenticeship models in the United States have long existed outside the realm of university teacher preparation programs and other professions requiring four-year degrees. With threats of increasing childcare options, teacher shortages and difficulty in teacher recruitment, particularly in rural areas, a national spotlight now shines on apprenticeship programs, a “place-based” or “working-integrated” educational approach that occurs in the community childcare centers and schools. The authors explore the critical need for high quality early childhood educators and the many challenges and barriers impacting individuals and rural communities invested in high quality early childhood education. Several place-based models of apprenticeship will be explored with particular emphasis on the Apprenticeship Program at Carlow University, the first four-year Department of Labor approved program in Pennsylvania.

Keywords: *place-based, early childhood apprenticeship, rural education, teacher preparation*

Introduction

According to the US Department of Labor (2022), registered apprenticeship (RA) programs provide many benefits: skilled workforce, improved productivity, reduced turnover, customizable training, retain greater percentage of workers, and increase workforce diversity. With roots in skilled labor, apprenticeship programs have grown across many fields: transportation, telecom, hospitality, healthcare, information technology, energy, financial services, manufacturing, construction, and cybersecurity. “RA programs are typically sponsored by an employer or group of employers, labor–management organizations, industry associations, or an intermediary such as a community-based organization or community college” (Rolland, 2015, p. 2) Programs can be primarily course-based with minimum hour requirements or competency-based and evaluated by performance is supervised apprenticeship program. Given the wide range of occupations utilizing an apprenticeship approach, program time varies significantly (Rolland, 2015). With over 800,000 recognized apprentices operating in the country, interest in the model is growing across professional fields.

Brief History of Apprenticeship

The history of apprenticeship reaches back to the Middle Ages and gilded craftsmen and includes indentured relationships used in Colonial United States. After the Industrial Revolution, the relationship with apprenticeship models expanded to accommodate union engagement and then

interest from US political forces for a highly skilled labor popular to support war efforts (Jacoby, 2001). In 1937, the Registered Apprenticeship Program was codified in law as the Fitzgerald Act (Apprenticeship USA, n.d.), but apprenticeship as a concept remained aligned with trade and vocational positions and not professional degree “white collar” positions. In much of the late 20th century, apprenticeship models, associated with vocational programs, fell out of favor in the American educational system, a system hyper-focused on a more traditional collegiate pipeline (Ferenstein, 2018) and elite institutions of higher education. Institutions of higher education have historically watched apprenticeship from the sideline, only recently collaborating in the practice of developing programs in collaboration with State legislators, The Department of Labor, or school districts experiencing teacher shortages. The inclusion of higher education into the apprenticeship landscape stands to strengthen career progression and upward social mobility for individuals if barriers for university engagement are addressed (Anderson et al., 2012) and true collaboration is valued and respected by workforce partners and Universities which leads to “co-designed models” (Bravenboer, 2016).

European Connection

Many European nations are historically heavily invested in apprenticeship programs with substantial financial commitments and a deep cultural respect for connecting school to work practices (Alliance for American Manufacturing, 2019). Switzerland is lauded as “the gold standard of vocational learning, where roughly two thirds of higher education students work and learn at the same time, graduating with little to no debt” (Ferenstein, 2018, para. 6). The Swiss model of vocational education and training (VET) is integral to the design of secondary school and University preparation, and hailed by industries, from high-tech to trade, as fundamental to a qualified workforce. Adolescents ages 16-19 choose from hundreds of paid internships/apprentice opportunities which seamlessly transition to full-time employment opportunities or further educational pathways (Ferenstein, 2018). Nationally, Swiss invests one percent of its GDP to support VET in 200+ different apprentice programs, with most funding for paid apprentices coming from the employers themselves (Swindal et al., 2019).

Apprenticeship in Education

Over the last ten years, challenges in teacher recruitment, teacher shortages, teacher diversification, and pay equity have taxed US school districts and State Departments of Education and reignited interest in “Grow-Your-Own Programs” and apprenticeship models. In a jointly released memo, United States Secretary of Labor, Martin Walsh, and United States Secretary of Education, Miguel Cardona (2022), outlined their case for State adoption of Registered Apprenticeship Programs (RAP) to address pressing teacher shortages, particularly in high-demand disciplines, and to ensure teacher candidates are not strapped with crippling debt from pursuit of their degrees with teacher certification. “Two of the most important actions states and districts can take to address these challenges are to provide affordable high-quality pathways into the profession and to ensure that the teaching” (Walsh & Cardona, 2022, para. 2).

The Secretaries outlined various recommended funding mechanisms sources, many federal, to fund programs and address pay equity, particularly for teacher assistants and paraprofes-

sionals who constitute a large portion of the potential teacher pipeline. Secretaries Walsh and Cardona (2022) further request enhanced collaboration with workforce organizations and educational systems as seen in comparable international models.

Programmatic Expectations

Apprenticeship programs in teacher preparation are typically designed with programmatic expectations aligned to traditional teacher preparation programs; these include robust coursework, extensive practicum experiences, and identical student teaching requirements to those pursuing traditional routes of certification (Office of Apprenticeship, n.d.). Differences are noted in course delivery, with some on-on-the job classes offered, course offerings adjusted for working adult schedules, and on-the-job student teaching opportunities. In fact, apprenticeship programs, by design, provide for even greater “preservice” teacher experiences and practicum hours with an employment component.

It is only recently apprenticeship programs and alternative teacher certification have been posited to address the growing teacher shortage. Educator apprenticeship programs differ significantly from alternative routes. The latter usually involve less time in coursework and abbreviated or limited practicum or student teaching requirements. In some States, Pennsylvania being one such example, candidates in alternative certification paths take a different exam than traditional candidates. Other alternative certification pathways are orchestrated and governed by entities outside of university-based and State-approved teacher preparation programs. Approximately 18% of teachers entering the teaching profession completed an alternative certification pathway in 2015-2016 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). Participants in alternative routes experience greater turnover and are more likely to leave the teaching profession before five years (Center for Great Public Schools, 2019). Additionally, academic performance of PK-12 students may suffer under alternatively prepared teachers (Helig & Jez, 2010). However, alternative certification programs do tend to enroll a greater number of diverse candidates (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022).

Apprenticeship programs do not seek to circumvent robust coursework, extensive practicum experiences, or student teaching requirements. Instead, they directly address barriers for degree completion and teacher certification while engaging with individuals in the schools, classrooms, and childcare centers where they already work. Apprenticeship programs, by design, are centralized in community-based paid employment. Individuals already working in educational settings can immediately apply theory to practice and draw upon a wealth of scaffolded experiences to reinforce their learning. More pedagogical skills training coupled with intensive clinical experience leads to greater job satisfaction, longer tenures in employment, and greater academic benefits for students (Ingersoll et al., 2012).

Need for Apprenticeship

The pre-apprenticeship and apprenticeship model of teacher preparation can uniquely serve rural communities with individualized supports, place-based learning, mentorship, and coursework offered on-location and online. While challenges abound in the recruitment and retention of highly qualified educators in rural America, one approach, an apprenticeship model of educator preparation for early childhood and elementary education, has the advantage of simultaneously addressing another critical issue facing rural communities: a severe lack of childcare options. Sixty percent of

rural families face a child-care desert, defined as three or more children in need of placement for every childcare slot (Joughin, 2021). Accessible childcare also supports rural workforce development.

Challenges in Childcare and the Importance of High-Quality Early Education

Childcare in the United States is a multifaceted and complex system with intersecting dynamic factors. These factors overlap and influence one another; quality of care is directly influenced by the quality of personnel, and personnel quality is directly influenced by degree attainment.

Researchers overwhelmingly suggest that investing early pays off later (Borkholder, 2021). High quality childcare positively impacts a child's overall school readiness. This is particularly true for the racial gap in reading. Children who had access to quality preschool have a better chance of graduating from high school and going to college (Meloy et al., 2019). Children in high-quality care environments show more advanced language skills, do better in school, and have fewer behavior problems and better social skills. "Emotional well-being and social competence provide a solid foundation for emerging cognitive abilities, and together they are the bricks and mortar that comprise the foundation of human development," (Center on the Developing Child, 2015, para. 4). Quality of care is directly related to highly qualified educators who "use a developmentally appropriate program and provide adequate learning time for students" (Meloy et al., 2019, para. 7).

For many Americans, finding licensed childcare options is difficult. "As of 2018, half of Americans were living in a childcare desert with only one available childcare spot for every three children in need of care" (Joughin, 2021, p. 1). This is further exacerbated in rural areas, though suburban and urban areas remain negatively impacted. Childcare needs are directly related to workforce needs. Between 11 and 15 million families in the United States require childcare to maintain employment. Childcare options are even more limited for individuals who work "off-hours" after school, evenings, and weekends; these times are needed for those who work in service industries and in medical fields. With the cost of infant and toddler care two and a half times that of preschool age children, many centers struggle to provide childcare options for children one month to age three (Gibbs & Malik, 2022).

Staff turnover is greatest in centers with low wages, and low wages are the norm, not the exception. Childcare workers are among the most poorly compensated of all entry level professions (Porter, 2012). In the *Occupational Outlook Handbook* published by the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2022), the median pay was \$13.22 an hour with an expected 150,000 open positions a year for at least the next ten years. Federal estimates of average hourly pay are \$11.52 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2022).

Most educators in early childhood education are women, and almost half are women of color (McLean et al., 2021). "Early educators of color are more likely to be at the lower end of the wage continuum, even when controlling for education level" (Joughin, 2021, Section III). The COVID 19 pandemic only exacerbated personnel issues (Nestor, 2020). State and federal efforts to address tuition subsidies create a greater need for more qualified educators. The career lattice in childcare requires advanced education and a bachelor's degree in education. Without opportunities for advancement, many stay trapped in poverty wages or leave the field after a few years. As a result, there is a direct connection between high turnover and low-quality centers. Some highly rated centers use a system called *Continuity of Care*. Early childhood educators stay with

their assigned children despite changes in the age of children. This “looping” style means educators move with their children as they advance in age/grade, thus providing consistency in the adult-child relationships over several years in care (McMullen, 2018).

There is a direct connection between quality of care and health benefits, the latter of which directly impacts communities and families. According to Gibbs and Malik (2022), high quality childcare creates opportunities for early health screens, behavioral assessments, and sharing of nutritional information with parents.

In place-based apprenticeship programming, these needs are highlighted, and programmatic or curricular implications discussed with real-life application. Childcare remains a largely privatized venture, and in many states, an unregulated one. Even in states like Pennsylvania with regulatory protections and quality standards, operating high-quality childcare with appropriate teacher/child ratios is not a sustainable business model. This is especially true when equitable compensation for teachers is considered. The cost of care is then passed on to families and cannot be sustained.

According to Malik (2021), on average, childcare costs for a family with two incomes and two young children is 11% of take-home pay. Single parents pay upwards of 40% of their take-home pay for childcare for two children. Proposed federal legislation in the *Build Back Better Act*, had it passed, would have provided universal preschool for children ages 3-4 and a “...a sliding scale limit on childcare costs for families” (Malik, 2021, Potential Weekly Childcare Savings Section). “In 32 states, a typical family would save more than \$100 per week on childcare” (Malik, 2021, Potential Weekly Childcare Savings Section). Greater federal or state investment in childcare subsidies will create a greater demand but with continued limited childcare options.

Most childcare centers and home-based service providers are tuition dependent entities that operate under a complicated funding formula for state aid. Tuition subsidies are income dependent. In Pennsylvania, the quality system provides One (lowest) to Four (highest) STAR ratings. Centers must have a STAR Three or Four rating to qualify for competitive slots with *Head Start* (funded by the PA Department of Human Services) or *PreK Counts* (funded by the PA Department of Education). Qualified educators with bachelor’s degrees in education are one critical piece to the STAR rating system. *Head Start* and *PreK Counts* serve preschool age children. However, funding for *Head Start* and *PreK Counts* only covers 180 school days and requires at least five hours of instruction using specific instructional techniques. The reimbursement rate, per child, is \$9,200 for *Head Start* (100% below poverty rate) and \$8,500 (300% below poverty rate) for *Head Start* (Moran et al., 2017). Centers with greater stability tend to offer the highest quality care through a blended model of *Head Start/PreK Counts* and private pay options.

The care of infants and toddlers is two and a half times the expense of PreK aged children (three and four years old) as outlined in the Moran et al. (2017) report, *Childcare Funding and Finance in Pennsylvania*. “Current revenue streams and reimbursement rates are inadequate to support the care of infants and toddlers. In Pennsylvania, reimbursement rates for *Child Care Works* (CCW), the only revenue stream that funds care for low-income infants and toddlers, are often inadequate to cover the actual cost of care. Even with tiered reimbursement rates, all providers in our sample brought in less daily revenue per infant than they spent daily on the average infant’s care. For every infant served, centers in our sample face a shortfall of more than one-third – 38%” (Moran et al., 2017, Findings Section). These braided revenue streams (private pay, public subsidies, private contributions) and tuition dependent models fall to Center Directors to coordinate and manage, most of whom have backgrounds in education and not business.

One of Pennsylvania’s early childhood University apprenticeship models, as described below, directly addresses three of the dynamics impacting the childcare system, and by extension, this model has the potential to positively impact a fourth factor—the number of childcare centers/childcare options for families. In most childcare centers, minimum qualifications for employment as an assistant teacher or paraprofessional are a high school diploma and nine education credits which comprise the Child Development Associate (CDA) credential. Being a lead teacher usually require a bachelor’s degree, especially in PreK Counts and Head Start Programs. Early childhood and elementary educators are required to have a four-year degree with teacher certification. Educational requirements for teacher assistants or paraprofessionals vary slightly among districts and States. At a minimum, a high school diploma is typically required. In some instances, employment contracts include additional coursework or professional development training. Teaching assistants working in special education may need additional specialized training or certifications, particularly when working with children with autism or emotional/behavioral disorders.

Teacher Recruitment and Teacher Shortages

The difficulties of teacher recruitment and retention in rural communities is well documented; recruitment is made difficult with isolated locations or less educator pay, and rural schools have higher rates of teacher turnover (Azano et al., 2020). Recruitment has been further exacerbated with the overall decline in the number of State-issued teacher certifications, and the significant decline in those interested in pursuing teaching as a career since 2010. Teacher shortages are especially marked in special education, STEM disciplines, and foreign languages (AACTE, 2022). Teacher education programs are faced with enrollment gaps and resulting financial constraints while districts are faced with shortages and critical unfilled positions taxed with a lack of qualified substitute teachers. In response, many States have adopted measures meant to reduce barriers to program completion including eliminating the standardized exams for program admission or certification (Will, 2022). Other States have provided other measures of achieving passing scores by using sliding GPA scales or portfolio-based review when teacher candidates initially fail content certification exams within certain parameters (Will, 2022).

One critical reason for the decline in those pursuing education as a career or remaining in the teaching profession is stagnant educator wages and the lack of professional respect for teaching as a profession, both of which result in high teacher turnover. The latter was exacerbated by the pandemic and political divisiveness that defines many State and local Boards of Education (Knox, 2022). Known as the “pay penalty,” teachers earn significantly less than their college-educated peers, on average 23% less, with the weekly wage gap flat for 25 years (Allegretto, 2022). As college and University tuition has risen, wages remain stagnant and make debt repayment more difficult.

However, using an apprenticeship model, existing childcare workers and educator paraprofessionals are not recruited from outside rural districts but engaged in areas where they are already part of the fabric of rural communities. This provides a unique opportunity to use place-based pedagogy in an apprenticeship model of professional educator development. This model honors the experiences of those already working with children and supports on-the-job learning connected to college credit. In doing so, educational services are brought into the community, not offered separately from it, and barriers to degree completion are tailored to support individual students. In addition, combining best practices in online platforms, and using existing Wifi and

technology supports within childcare centers and schools, University classes and coursework can be delivered in the environments where aspiring teachers work.

Strengths-Based Rural Education

Despite the challenges in rural educational models, rural schools and childcare centers have discernable strengths in their “centrality to community life and their ability to engage families” (Redding & Walberg, 2012, p. 4). Apprenticeship models of teacher certification build upon these strengths and ground theoretical coursework in local understanding. From here, a broad national and theoretical understanding can be extrapolated. An apprenticeship model provides prospective teachers authentic experiences grounded in “place-conscious instruction,” which serves to honor how students learn (Azano et al., 2020) and “to prepare citizens who understand their local lives and are thus prepared to participate in the democratic processes of its creation and sustainability” (Eppley, 2011, p. 2).

This honoring of professional experiences through an assets lens builds confidence and self-efficacy in adults pursuing undergraduate or graduate teaching degrees. For some, they are first in their family to do so. These individuals who are already deeply committed to the Education profession usually stay in their communities and experience greater career mobility and earning potential once they graduate. Part of the design of an apprenticeship program, apart from the constructs of paid employment while completing degree or certification requirements, must address and support the self-efficacy of those participating in the program, particularly as many apprentices have long-standing support roles rather than lead teacher positions and have been in a deferential position under the authority of lead or veteran licensed teachers (Lazarides & Warner, 2020).

Undergraduate teacher education programs are designed for traditional full-time (on-campus) students with courses and practicum work scheduled during the day. Most state licensing protocols require a minimum of 12 weeks of student teaching under the direction of a licensed teacher. Leaving employment for even one month is not a financial reality for most individuals employed in a childcare center or working as a paraprofessional or teacher assistant. The apprenticeship model addresses these barriers and uses a personalized system of mentorship, coaching, and on-the-job classes.

Apprenticeship Models

Apprenticeship programs are historically aligned to skilled trades, but some States are experimenting with apprenticeship models of teacher preparation codified by State governor offices and legislatures. Tennessee is notable for their full-scale approach to K-12 models of apprenticeship teacher training (White & Garcia, 2022). Austin Peay State University in Clarksville, Tennessee in partnership with Clarksville-Montgomery County school district, have been operating their “Grow Your Own” program since 2018 (Will, 2022). It was formally registered as an apprenticeship program in 2022 with Tennessee’s adoption of a Registered Apprenticeship Program. Prospective teachers without a bachelor’s degree attend classes at a local community college (free in TN), and then complete coursework for certification at Austin Peay. Apprentices remain employed throughout completion of the three-year program at Clarksville-Montgomery County as a teacher assistant and commit to three years of employment with the school district upon completion of the program. Wrap-around supports include in-school mentorship, provided textbooks, and funding

for certification exams (Will, 2022). This model maintains robustness of teacher education program expectations intact while offering opportunities for employment and support for degree completion.

Additional States have followed suit to formalize Registered Apprenticeship Programs: Arkansas, Colorado, Iowa, Kansas, New Hampshire, Texas, and West Virginia (Will, 2022). The West Virginia model targets recruitment of high school students. Titled, *The Pathway to Teaching Initiative*, this model is being piloted in several counties. While in high school, students complete a sequence of Advanced Placement (AP) or dual-enrolled college courses provided free of charge by the State of WV. Once in college, students enrolled in the program complete paid internships or practicum experiences while taking coursework. Student teaching is replaced with a year-long employment contract in a participating school district where collegiate seniors serve as teachers of record.

According to the World Population Review (2021), WV ranks number three of most rural States in the United States. With historically low teacher wages, and highly competitive teacher markets in surrounding States, it is expected this new model will offer incentive to high school students to take an interest in education, accumulate little to no debt, and remain in West Virginia in teacher positions.

The WV model also addresses the very real issue of declining interest in teaching as a profession among adolescents. With fewer high school students interested in teaching as a profession, citing pay as their number one reason (Croft et al., 2018), this model seeks to engage high schoolers in the profession early and connect payment to field experiences. These models of extensive work practicum support and extended teaching experiences mirror the push for year-long teacher residences. While most teacher residency models were built as no-pay for participating students (interns are not teachers of record), apprenticeship models marry employment with on-the-job student teaching (Alliance & Teach, 2022).

When states adopt an apprenticeship model, additional funding sources become available via the Department of Labor. Like childcare funding, braided funding support from Title II of ESSA funds can be combined with Individual with Disabilities Act funding, available ESSER funding, or private philanthropic dollars to support the design and implementation of these innovative models (Will, 2022). In their joint memo, the US Secretary of Labor and the US Secretary of Education advocate for aggressive use of federal monies, particularly Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) Title I funds (Walsh & Cardona, 2022). In their book, *In Search of Deeper Learning: The Quest to Remake the American High School*, authors Jal Mehta and Sarah Fine (2019), define successful programs as those which elevate and honor student voice and choice, develop a sense of community, and engage students in apprenticeship. While typical US apprenticeship programs target adults (age 30), high school programs, like European models, provide a connected career pathway in teaching (Seleznov & Ford, 2016). Using the College-in-High School model, high school students can earn nine college credits in Education courses. These nine credits in Education fulfill the child development associate certificate (CDA) required to work in a childcare center. Rising Stars Tuition Assistance Program supports individuals in fulfillment of their CDA while employed in licensed child-care centers.

Spotlight on Carlow's Apprenticeship Program

Pennsylvania has been recognized for its pioneering apprenticeship work in early childhood education (Tesfia, 2019). Carlow University's early childhood education program was the

first Pennsylvania four-year apprenticeship program licensed by the Department of Labor in 2019. Carlow University is in the Oakland neighborhood of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania in Allegheny County. The Apprenticeship Program has grown to include work with 63 childcare centers across a six-county region, much of it rural. In PA, grade band certification for early childhood education spans PreK-4th grade. In 2018, a grant from Office of Child Development and Early Learning (OCDEL) to the Education Department at Carlow allowed for engagement with childcare centers to better understand barriers to degree completion impacting employees deeply committed to the education profession. Many of these individuals had completed some college coursework (12-24 hours) but could not afford to return to school while continuing to work full-time. Most were parents with significant family obligations. Identified barriers were limited financial resources, traditional college schedules conflicting with work, access to technology and high-speed internet, navigating systems in higher education, childcare, and beliefs of their own aptitude. For those wishing to complete teacher certification, taking a semester off from employment for student teaching was an improbable situation.

There are multiple points of entry to the apprenticeship program at Carlow University. Apprentices may begin as traditional freshmen who completed a pre-apprenticeship/college-in-high school program or as transfer students, with or without an associate degree. Beginning with students ages 16-19, Carlow University's model includes the College-in-High School program where high school students remain in their home school and complete college coursework as part of their high school day with an approved instructor. Some high schools utilize the Career and Technical Education (CTE) model and engage high school students in on-site childcare centers. CTE courses then transfer to Carlow University via articulation agreements at program completion. A third model allows high school students to intern at the Carlow University's Child Care Center or PreK Program one day a week and complete coursework in Education on the University's campus with Education faculty. In these instances, the partnering high schools have established internship programs and provide transportation for students to and from campus.

Carlow University's apprenticeship program provides a pathway for individuals employed at least 25 hours a week in a licensed childcare center to complete a bachelor's degree in Education. Undergraduate apprentice students at Carlow pursuing Education choose one of three majors:

- Early Childhood Education leading to PreK-4th grade certification
- Early Childhood Education leading to PreK-4th grade certification with Special Education PreK-12th grade
- Early Development and Learning

The Early Development and Learning (EDLE) major was designed for aspiring educational professionals who wish to work with children or adolescents in childcare centers or out-of-school learning/nonformal environments. Graduates go on to serve as Center Directors, After-School Directors, employees in non-profit educational organizations, or in community-based professional organizations. The EDLE major focuses on child and adolescent development and psychology, fostering parent and community engagement, and effective instructional practices and program design.

Carlow Apprenticeship students are provided specially discounted tuition aligned to the state Professional Development System (PDO) and community college rate; apprentice students tuition rate is \$322.00 per credit. A designated financial aid officer works directly with apprenticeship students to complete the FAFSA and secure federal financial aid via Pell and PHEA grants.

Remaining tuition costs are then applied to PDO funding resulting in little to no cost for students. Multiple entities across campus advocated and secured this discounted rate for apprentice students. Drawing upon the University's mission and social justice philosophy, the adjusted tuition rate was formally adopted in spring of 2020 and serves as a model for other private institutions across the State. Funding for other components of the apprenticeship model, including the dedicated personnel and Apprenticeship Program Director are split among grants and endowments provided by private Foundations committed to supporting high quality early childhood education and the professionalism of those employed in the field.

Additionally, the apprenticeship model provides a yearly lending library of books and financial support for certification exams. It is expected that students will graduate with little to no debt. All apprenticeship students receive a Carlow mentor, a support person who meets frequently with students, monitors progress, coordinates support services, provides feedback on coursework, and offers encouragement throughout the year. The mentor connects students with tutoring services, mental health services, or library support as needed. At the beginning of the program, weekly check-ins and more intrusive advising allows mentors to address concerns before they become larger issues. The connection with mentors fosters professional and personal growth, and these relationships, coupled with relationships in the cohort of apprentices working in the same childcare Centers or elementary school programs, builds professional learning communities. Apprentices, in turn, uplift and support one another just as highly effective teacher networks do in schools as part of their involvement in professional organizations and professional learning communities (Higgins, 2016). This builds beliefs in the ability of apprentices to complete degree requirements and maintain or gain employment as teachers. Mentors also connect apprentice students with technology access, offering a personalized option of support. For some students without an iPad or laptop, Carlow's apprentice program provides portable keyboards attached to an iPhone. Other students are connected to resources for high-speed internet access or hot spots. Center Directors encourage apprentice students to utilize their childcare, enter wi-fi to complete assignments and access the University's learning management system.

Twenty-four college credits in Education are completed on-the-job in the apprenticeship model. Apprentice students must earn 120 credits for the bachelor's degree in Education. On-site coaches oversee application of theory to practice in on-the-job courses. Also known as 'work integrated learning', immediately connecting theory to practice, in this case via employment in an educational setting, deepens an understanding of a teacher's multiple roles, particularly their own knowledge of self and culture, thus promoting self-efficacy and enhancing understanding of rural community strengths (McArdle 2010).

Other general studies coursework and Education coursework for apprenticeship students is tailored for working adults by online and evening course offerings. Coursework taken by apprenticeship students is identical to coursework and State competencies completed by any other student pursuing an education degree or teacher certification. Beyond the main campus, Carlow University operates two centers, one in a rural county, where in-person classes are scheduled, easing transportation concerns. Carlow's apprenticeship model operates in six counties. Half of apprentice students identify as living and working in rural communities.

Apprentice students enrolled in the Early Childhood major leading to teacher certification at Carlow University complete a month-long paid practicum in elementary grades outside of their Center as part of their methods coursework to ensure robustness of experiences in primary grades as a compliment to the extensive practicum experiences working with children ages two through six. Apprentices then complete student teaching in their childcare Centers under licensed teachers

while maintaining their employment status. As part of the apprenticeship models, all participating childcare centers or elementary schools are offered free and accessible professional development. This professional development is personalized and offered on-site when Carlow faculty or staff travel to childcare Centers, or it is offered online in an accessible platform. This addresses a critical difficulty in rural school districts, coordinating high-quality professional development (Lavalley, 2018). A grant-funded scholarship program provides tuition for eight Center Directors a year to complete their graduate-level Early Childhood Supervisory certification for PA.

Apprenticeship models can serve as catalysts for teacher diversification efforts. Twenty five percent of all enrolled apprentice students in early childhood education at Carlow University are members of a racial or ethnic minority. The apprenticeship model was applied to the Para2Teacher model with Pittsburgh Public Schools when Carlow University responded to a Request for Proposal (RFP) for university partners. As described on the Pittsburgh Public Schools (PPS) (2020) website, “This partnership will support our efforts to increase the diversity of our teacher workforce through growing our own – those paraprofessionals who already work to support our students every day” (para. 2). School district personnel, after a competitive application process, selected 22 paraprofessionals, 95% of whom represented racial minorities, with earned bachelor’s degrees to complete their master’s degree leading to State certification in early childhood education, special education, or secondary education. Participants were provided scholarship support throughout the two-year program, and the district kept all paraprofessionals under full-time employment (providing their salary and holding their position) during a semester-long student teaching. All graduating paraprofessionals agreed to a two-year employment commitment with the district, and the district gives preferential hiring. Most participating paraprofessionals selected special education for their discipline having worked for years in special education classrooms supporting children and adolescents with disabilities.

With an average age of 34, current undergraduate early childhood apprentices at Carlow University have a range of life and professional experiences from which to draw. Honoring these lived experiences provides an example for aspiring teachers so they may honor the same in the children with whom they work. Teacher preparation at Carlow emphasizes culturally responsive and developmentally appropriate teaching practices with an intentional focus on supporting and nurturing children from urban, suburban, and rural communities. Using a strengths-based lens, coursework is scaffolded with increasing application of community-based and family engagement strategies. Special program emphasis is placed on professionalism in the field of Education, especially the work of teachers in classrooms with young children, a profession often disparaged or disregarded as little more than babysitting (Harwood & Tukonic, 2016).

Carlow’s Apprenticeship Program grew at a rapid pace between 2020 and 2022. Interestingly, an unexpected barrier was illuminated as more interested individuals made inquiries and applied for program admission. Collegiate applications require copies of transcripts from other higher education institutions where any coursework was completed. For some individuals, transcripts from other schools were inaccessible because of financial holds for outstanding balances regardless of circumstance or the number of years passed between attempts at collegiate coursework. As with so many others, challenges in work-life-school balance continues to be a barrier for apprenticeship students, and post-pandemic, there is an increase in self-reported mental health struggles and financial concerns against a backdrop of inflation and higher interest rates.

Rural Educational Considerations and the Power of Place

Across the United States, half of all school districts, one-third of schools, and one-fifth of students are rural (Lavalley, 2018). In PA, according to the Center for Rural PA (n.d.), A legislative agency of the PA General Assembly, “There are 48 rural counties and 19 urban counties in Pennsylvania. In 2020, nearly 3.4 million residents, or 26 percent of the state's 13.0 million residents, called these rural counties home. At the school district level, 238 of the state's 500 public school districts are rural. During the 2020-2021 school year, 374,732 public school students attended schools in rural districts, or 25 percent of the state's nearly 1.41 million public school students” (Center for Rural PA, n.d., Applying the Definition Section). Rural communities experience deep and generational poverty at a rate greater than urban counterparts (Lavalley, 2018). “This poverty contributes to lower educational attainment in rural schools. Only one in 10 people from low-income families attain a bachelor’s degree by the age of 25” (Gutierrez, 2021, p. 1). Inequality in teacher salaries, particularly marked in unpopulated areas with little tax base, and transportation challenges make teacher recruitment and retention especially challenging.

Apprenticeship Education models provide unique support for rural community development. With the linkage between workforce and childcare and education (National Library of Medicine, 2011), apprenticeship models directly respond to local needs and rural community investment. School-based programming for students can serve as a catalyst for community growth. Schools serve multiple functions within rural communities, and apprenticeship models open possibilities for high school students and community members interested in participating in the education profession.

Vander Ark et al. (2020), authors of *The Power of Place: Authentic Learning Through Place-Based Education*, centers place-based learning at the heart of creating equitable learning environments responsive to individual student needs and experiences. Place-based instruction combined with workplace learning is a uniquely situated design which allows participating students/apprentices to strengthen their own networks and build social capital.

There is a collective rather than individualistic ethos found in place-based learning. Such an approach centers apprentices learning in the context of networked communities and deepens understanding of systems on how educational, political, legislative, non-profit, and financial systems operate in a collaborative but often competing way.

Apprentice students are engaged in the Education profession, but they develop a broader view and more intimate understanding of how educational decisions are made, policies determined, and funding allocated when theoretical understanding is connected to lived professional experiences grounded in the communities where they live and work. In this way, Carlow’s Education Apprenticeship Program invites apprentice students to participate in State-level convenings, advocacy engagements, and professional development during their time in program and beyond. Being situated in a “place” can provide a grounding and security needed to engage in other spaces and places where educational decision-making happens.

The idea of what it means to be a student in the University is also adjusted in this new paradigm. Carlow’s Apprenticeship Program brings the University to the student “place.” Special care is made to connect the identity of apprentice students to one of membership in the Carlow University community. On-the-job coursework occurs in childcare centers. Assigned mentors visit Centers and conduct meetings electronically. Coursework tailored to working adults occurs online in the evenings, mostly synchronously. Apprentices are likely to attend a function at one of Carlow’s campuses only one or two times throughout their tenure in the program. However, belonging

can happen in communities of learning without being physically present, and fostering belonging is essential in building cohorts of apprenticeship students and increasing their self-efficacy.

Conclusion

The aim of an educator apprenticeship program is the development of a high-quality educator, who, in turn, will positively impact the lives of hundreds of students in our rural communities. A skilled and highly qualified compassionate teacher can positively improve student achievement outcomes more than any other factor (Darling-Hammond, 2000). A high-quality apprenticeship program can positively impact the lives of educators by providing wrap-around supports and a financially accessible pathway for degree completion and teacher certification.

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The Everyday Work of Rural-Serving Community College STEM Faculty: Lessons from an Institutional Ethnography Across Wyoming

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Abstract

Rural-serving community college (RSCC) STEM faculty play an essential role for their students and communities. We employed an institutional ethnographic (IE) approach to elucidate the social and ruling relations organizing the everyday work of RSCC STEM faculty in Wyoming. Our data confirm that RSCC educators see students at the center of their work. They detailed gaps and barriers to STEM transfer and explained administration and policy impact on their work, and described work that is invisible. Faculty's feelings of isolation and connection were inextricably linked to social networks and administrator acknowledgement. We explicate a problematic wherein RSCC administrators not centering the student when making decisions grinds with faculty's philosophical and practical focus on student-centered work. Based on our findings, we hope to persuade readers with our practice implications as you question whose interests are being served and the role that power and politics play in the everyday RSCC work.

Keywords: *institutional ethnography, community college, rural education, STEM transfer, inclusion, educational development*

Introduction

Rural-serving community college STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) faculty have long provided an essential role, teaching those in transfer STEM degrees and terminal degrees in allied health and other technology-related programs. Alliance for Research on Regional Colleges (ARRC) labeled 1,087 colleges as rural-serving, serving nearly 15 percent of the 10.2 million students in higher education institutions in the United States (Rush-Marlowe, 2021). Moreover, with historically strong enrollments of women and underrepresented minorities, rural-serving community colleges (RSCC) could play a pivotal role in attracting more significant proportions of these populations to STEM fields (Patton, 2006).

Rural communities often aim to broaden their economies through growth in STEM-based industries. However, rural students may be reluctant to pursue STEM occupations if they feel that jobs cannot be found at home (Harris & Hodges, 2018). Employing an ecological perspective when considering rural communities can enable educational developers to integrate the unique community context, value systems, and cultural ways of knowing to strengthen their career guidance strategies, better opening pathways into STEM. This systems approach, which includes genuinely listening to teachers who know local value systems, enables a richer understanding beyond typical

individualistic career advising approaches (Gibbons et al., 2019). RSCC faculty members serve a critical role in the community as STEM disciplinary experts engaging in the community and bridging the social and cultural context of the community to the discipline to support the students' learning (Rivera et al., 2019). In addition, by building relationships between the rural postsecondary student and the STEM field, the faculty members often do the hidden or invisible work of building student STEM identity while connecting the rural student to future opportunities not otherwise available (Kim et al., 2018).

In Wyoming, the community colleges are designated as rural-serving based on the measures of place, including population size, adjacency to a metropolitan area, and the share of credentials conferred in agriculture and natural resources (Koricich et al., 2022). RSCCs are often found in communities facing socioeconomic disparities, with smaller and more diverse enrollments, a more significant share of Native American students, and are reliant on declining state appropriations (Koricich et al., 2022). However, these data miss more contextual findings on the STEM faculty experience, social and cultural aspects of the teaching and learning institutional framework, and the faculty's role in facilitating student success and transfer.

Our study utilizes institutional ethnography (IE) to explore RSCC educators' everyday work as it is organized within the ruling relations of rural-serving community colleges. This work was part of Phase I of the Inclusive Excellence 3 (IE3) Initiative, funded partly by a grant. The IE method was used to explore the barriers of two-year to four-year transfer, particularly as faculty navigate them in their work with students in STEM disciplines. We approach this work from the standpoint that faculty members' experiences within institutions directly impact student inclusion. This work was part of Phase I of the Inclusive Excellence (ie3) initiative, funded partly by a grant to the university from the Howard Hughes Medical Institute (HHMI) through the Science Education Program. HHMI's guiding questions for the IE3 initiative are: (1) What are the root causes of institutional barriers to inclusion in STEM? (2) What creates and sustains those barriers? (3) Moreover, why are those barriers so durable? These questions provided context for the focus groups conducted at the community colleges across Wyoming.

Institutional ethnography (IE) is born out of the work of Dorothy E. Smith (1987, 1990, 2005, 2009). The IE approach queries, "what is actually happening?" in a material, connected world (Devault, 2006, p. 49). Dorothy Smith uses ruling relations as a heuristic device "...to discover how people's lives are coordinated concerning ruling ideas and practices" (Campbell & Gregor, 2002, p. 99). A problematic is used in IE research to direct attention to a possible set of tensions, paradoxes, or puzzles latent in, yet arising from, people's everyday actualities (Smith, 1987). IE is a liberating method critical of the traditional aim of sociological research, which objectifies those studied within a ruling hierarchy (Smith, 1990). The fieldwork of an institutional ethnographer focuses on those most marginalized by hierarchies. Then it aims to look "...from the margins inward - towards centers of power and administration searching to explicate the contingencies of ruling that shape local contexts" (DeVault, 1999, p. 48). Institutional ethnography focuses on physical, material connections and ruling relations and recognizes that these are organized in response to institutions.

Furthermore, IE acknowledges that the researcher never operates outside the interconnected relationship network (DeVault, 1999). IE speaks to the located knower and stresses the experienced knowing versus expert knowing. For our study, the rural location of the participants contextualized how the knowledge was organized and power was experienced (Campbell and Gregor, 2004). Rural faculty often play multiple roles across recruiting, curriculum development,

teaching, advising, community engagement, and outreach (Sansing-Helton et al., 2021). Our research frames what is known about RSCC educators' everyday work. It expands on how everyday practices are uniquely responsive to the social organization of the institution and the broader rural community context (Campbell et al., 2006). By understanding contexts that shape daily work and relationships that support transformation, the IE methodology has the power "to provide a rigorous, data-driven, and replicable explanation of actual practice" (LaFrance & Nicolas, 2012, p. 144). Herein, we seek to uncover the root causes of institutional barriers in STEM student transfer from community college to university by making visible the ruling relations governing coursework and programs seated at the faculty member's work. RSCC faculty and student services staff are frontline professionals caught up in the "ruling relations" of the broader organizational framework. From the literature and our experience as educators, we aim to shine a light on the everyday realities of RSCC educators. We further explicate how this work is shaped by institutional policies and procedures organized around social and ruling relations.

The Study

Our application of IE entailed collecting data through interviews and focus groups (Campbell & Gregor, 2002). We followed Smith's unique framing of collecting and analyzing data based on "looking up from where you are" to study how the individual works within a social order (Campbell et al., 2006). Our study was approved by the University's institutional review board (protocol #20211001RW03137). When conducting focus groups, we were sensitive to the rural community landscapes and unique contextual situatedness of our educators. Most participants were STEM faculty or student services staff; a few were educators and staff from other areas of the college.

We began our work informed by a problematic positing a disjuncture between what individual faculty experience daily and what the institution expects from them regarding the student-centered mission and institutional goals. Therefore, we approached every aspect of our study by taking the stance of the RSCC educator. During focus groups, we prompted participants to describe their role, their work, the influence of others, and policy and procedures' effect on the work (Krueger & Casey, 2014). Focus groups were recorded and analyzed with first and second-cycle coding used to categorize and group extended sequences of faculty work for further analysis and meaning. Extended narratives were read using a greater analytical focus on social organization.

Participant Recruitment and Focus Group Description

We utilized convenience and purposeful sampling (Patton, 2015). We made use of our existing networks with community colleges. These connections were previously established through a yearlong educational development program (herein referred to as the active learning training program) facilitated by the state's land grant university and serving college educators statewide. We began with the community college with the most educators trained by the active learning training program. We then proceeded to contact each community college in order of decreasing program engagement. Many educators in this network have remained connected to nurture inclusive excellence work. Amongst these educators, we selected one or two opinion leaders to whom we sent an initial email. In this email, we explained our goal of doing focus groups at each community college. We requested assistance from these opinion leaders in (1) compiling an email list of STEM/STEM-affiliated educators and (2) orchestrating our visit. In all cases, we reminded the opinion leaders of our inclusive definition of STEM/STEM-affiliated as "anyone who

interfaces in some way with our STEM students.” In all but three cases, we deferred to the opinion leaders to generate the email list. In some cases, opinion leaders were slow to or did not respond. In those cases, we generated a list of STEM/STEM-affiliated educators using the college web directory.

Once we had a complete email list, we sent an invitation introducing the Howard Hughes Medical Institute (HHMI) Inclusive Excellence 3 work. It further detailed the statewide inclusive excellence efforts and stated our goal “...to shine light into the processes and experiences of the work done by educators at [named community college] in creating an inclusive, equitable and antiracist environment.” Ultimately, we aimed to reduce isolation and create learning communities. We then polled the potential participants to determine the best time for the focus group. From the responses received, we scheduled the focus group time and reminded all educators on the listserv one or two additional times prior to the focus group. In several cases, due to slow or minimal responses, we individually emailed every educator with personalized statements of the invitation. In-person and Zoom focus groups lasted for between one and one and a half hours.

There were two institutions with smaller existing networks of prior active learning training participants that were repeatedly contacted. However, because they eventually failed to respond, each became a non-participating institution. In the case of the first, initial contact non-response was followed by a second contact elevating the request to an administrator who never responded. In the second case, the program-affiliated faculty responded and scheduled the focus group. However, administrators vetoed the focus group and requested a reschedule. One administrator requested clarification on how community college educators were tied to inclusive excellence work. This explanation was provided, but no response was received. Two more attempts were made to reschedule through that administrator, but no response was ever received.

The study timeframe was from January 2022 to October 2022. The community colleges visited were geographically distributed around the state: north, central, east, southeast, and southwest. Each college was assigned color pseudonyms randomly. After performing the in-person focus group, an online follow-up option was provided via Zoom either on the same day or later. A total of 8 focus groups were held. In total, we had 36 participants.

Institutional Overview

Each of the eight community colleges differs in cultural, economic, environmental, and demographic characteristics. The college with the pseudonym Yellow College has the largest student population at 6,000. It is also located in the largest urban center - a city of ~65,000. It is found in the county with the highest average wage and salary employment. Red College is also located in a relatively large urban center - a city of ~59,000. Green College has the smallest student body at 2,000. Amongst the counties with community colleges, Green College resides in the county with the lowest average wage and salary employment. Yellow and Green Colleges are found in highly agricultural counties. Orange College is in a county with an extensive mineral extraction industry. Blue College is proximate to a large national park and has the second-highest destination and other travel in the state (Wyoming Office of Tourism).

Description of the participants

Most participants were STEM educators. However, some participants were classified as staff members and worked in student support programs. In one case, a faculty developer attended,

and in a couple of cases, an educator from the liberal arts attended. The number of participants in each focus group ranged from two to ten.

Facilitating/moderating the focus group

Each in-person focus group began with an informal greeting over lunch, followed by an overview of the informed consent language. The introduction was scripted in the same way for every focus group, and participants were invited to sign the consent form before us asking the first question. Principles of and extensive experience in collaborative communication guided the facilitator. Collaborative communication is a democratic form of dialogue, sometimes called reflective discourse (J. Peters, personal communication, June 16, 2022). All follow-up questions were open-ended. For example, if a participant stated something of interest, a follow-up question would be phrased as “you mentioned [thing of interest]; can you say more about this?” Focusing techniques were also used. For example, after several participants answered the question, the facilitator would say, “I hear you saying that you aim to nurture [theme of interest] in your students.” Nine questions guided the focus group: (1) Tell us who you are, what role you play at the college, and your hopes for your students in STEM. (2) Describe your work with STEM students who inspire to transfer from [institution]. (3) Describe the work that involves student recruitment, admissions, or transfer. (4) How do students affect the work you do? (5) How does the administration affect the work you do? (6) Describe the policies and procedures that impact your work. Would you be willing to share any of the documents that you use? (7) How would you describe your feelings of connectedness or isolation? (8) Who are your most important advice givers? (9) Furthermore, is there anything else you want to tell us?

When questions were answered very broadly, the facilitator, or in some cases, the co-moderators, would invite the participant to provide specific examples. All focus groups were recorded using Zoom and a meeting Owl 360° camera. In addition, live transcripts were enabled, and meetings were automatically recorded to the cloud. Transcripts were saved and cleaned for accuracy and clarity.

Data Analysis

The transcripts were cleaned for transcription accuracy by the researcher. Then, they were uploaded in NVIVO 12 for further coding and analysis (QSR International Pty Ltd., 2020). First-cycle coding of the focus group transcripts used in vivo coding, process coding, and values coding simultaneously to attune the researchers to participant perspectives and the social organization of the work of faculty (Saldaña, 2016). Then, transcripts were read with second-cycle coding used to focus and provide categorization by producing data clusters that grouped extended sequences of faculty work for further analysis and memoing. These extended narratives between the focus group moderator and participants or between participants were reread with a greater analytical focus on social organization, social relations, and ruling relations from the experienced and located knower’s standpoint. Attention was placed on the talk that connected participants’ examples with the discourses of work with students and formal institutional work practices and professional discourses (Campbell et al., 2006). The presence and even absence of texts that mediated this discourse are presented as they arose in the community college educator’s stories.

Trustworthiness

Data were collected, coded, and discussed for consensus by the three authors. Author RM did the first round of coding, and author RS did the second round and collapsed these codes into categories. To increase rigor and trustworthiness, author RW did a code check of a randomly chosen transcript and reviewed and edited codes to confirm consistent coding. Before fully evolving this study's findings, all authors presented the work at an oral session to which RSCC educators were invited. Those in attendance gave feedback as a member check for our pre-final findings. In addition, a detailed description of our methods and recruitment and institutional context provides replicability, further increasing rigor.

Researcher Reflexivity and Positionality

Each author pre-journaled before the data collection and memoed on the process and analytical steps taken throughout the study. In addition, the researcher's thoughts and feelings were discussed and video recorded during weekly meetings. This process allows for bracketing of interpreting any more than writing on the basis of knowing as a requisite of IE data analysis (Campbell & Gregor, 2002). Author RS is a social scientist in pharmacy and an immigrant, woman of color coming into this work as a qualitative methodology expert and a content expert in rural disparities and inclusive pedagogy. Author RM served as a full-time RSCC faculty member for seven years prior to engaging in this research and was a Ph.D. student in curriculum and instruction throughout the duration of this study. Author RW is an educational developer, STEM faculty member, queer theorist, feminist scholar, and coach. She is the program director of the active learning training program through which primary recruiting for this study was done. As located knowers, we authors recognize that transfer discourse often favors university perspectives. We acknowledge that we inhabit space at the university set apart and privileged as compared to the spaces inhabited by the RSCC faculty member whose standpoint we aimed to take within the context of this study.

Findings

We elucidated six themes using mapping to describe and locate the individual's life experience (Smith, 1987, 1990). RSCC faculty, in conversations in the focus groups, mapped their work, either completed explicitly or because of other institutional demands, back to serving the student at the center. A discord was raised when they expressed components of their work that did not serve the student at the center. When questioned about their feelings of isolation or connectedness, these questions often returned to the student or the social networks they had built within the organization or broader community that reconnected them to their work serving student learning. Administrative and resultant faculty turnover in all the community colleges visited led to a perpetual state of change in policies and practices affecting the faculty member's work. The need to navigate the changing requirements dictated by the administration without reducing financial and resource constraints took a toll on the RSCC faculty's emotional health. The resultant faculty loss weakened the community college's social networks.

We begin by sharing our findings categorized into themes. We then explore an overt paradox that describes the disconnect between the work the RSCC faculty saw as best serving the student and the work they were being asked to do. In addition, our findings spotlight our research

problematic that depicts the administration, policy, faculty members' everyday work, and the needs of the rural student as points of disjuncture. Finally, the focus group participants mapped their feelings of connectedness with the students at the center of their work while describing their students as unique based on the rural locations they inhabited.

Students at the Center of Faculty Work

RSCC faculty members focused on student outcomes; they wanted their students to ask good questions, achieve their goals, and have the motivation, preparation, and skills to apply what they have learned. In addition, they wanted their students to gain grit, a growth mindset, and be able to solve problems. Faculty also hoped students would expand beyond their discipline and engage in extracurriculars. Their desires for students included the very pragmatic hope that they would be productive members of society, manage their time, have housing, a job, and the capacity to support their families. One microbiology faculty member spoke of her dreams for her students, stating:

...their education will lead to jobs that they will have long term; they will be able to support their families...Mostly my students are nursing, dental hygiene, and surgical tech with just actually a pretty small percent that is STEM in the STEM majors...

In addition, RSCC faculty also addressed the more profound hope that students would come to look at the world in a new way, have a passion for the discipline, and see the beauty in STEM. One biology faculty member spoke about how seeing the beauty in STEM can liberate the learner.

...I want my biology students to appreciate the beauty of the discipline...Of course, I am a little biased, but I am looking at biology as the philosophy of the universe. I want my students to live and breathe biology because, in so doing, I believe that they can put shoes on...; I think that we really take them anywhere...

Faculty had many ways to say that they want their students to gain science literacy and identity. For example, one faculty member spoke about wanting students to apply science literacy even when consuming social media.

I want [my students] to be well-prepared...I don't want them to go [to the university] or wherever they are going next, surprised or like they are not confident. So some of the biggest things [are] trying to build confidence...so they could go off and succeed; however, whatever they want, you know, I don't want all [to be] medical doctors, whatever they want to do...This is what I'm hoping...to better prepare them. So they can understand why [some] Facebook articles are wrong...

Gaps and Barriers to STEM Transfer

Faculty expressed the desire for their students to transfer. However, when speaking about barriers to the 2-year to 4-year transition, RSCC faculty referred to the long physical distances between the community colleges and the university. They saw relocation as a very pragmatic hurdle to overcome. They noted that it could be challenging for students to be away from home. One faculty member noted that the geographic separation was not only a constraint due to travel but

also due to cultural identity. He noted a strong link to the land: “We are a long way from [the university]. Not just geographically, but in the winter, it is almost impossible some years to get back and forth. And, we’re in a different bio-region.”

Regionally, participants also noted that STEM and biotechnology jobs and career opportunities might not be present, which may prevent students from heading toward those majors and engaging in course learning. The faculty discussed the deficit of direct opportunities within the discipline as barriers to student learning. For example, a chemistry faculty member showcased how his identity tied to STEM opportunities contrasted with his students' identities and location in the quote below.

Part of this issue is that in [our rural state], compared to other states where we had pharmaceutical companies, biotechnology companies, and medical schools within a 10-minute drive. Places where students can go and do an internship; they could work in the summer. We don’t have that here. Why should a student be interested in biotechnology when there is no company in [our state] within 100 miles? Why? We have not done a good job in attracting that kind of business; I don’t want to encourage students to major in chemistry; there are no companies for them to work at. I mean, where I was before, if a student graduated with a bachelor’s degree within two years, they would make more than a full professor at [our community college]. There is no such opportunity here. We are just like the prerequisite course for energy and engineering majors, and those who have graduated go into allied health fields; they go into... I don’t know where they go because we don’t see them.

These *not-around-here* discourses were shared across the statewide focus groups and seemed representative of the rural perspective of a resource deficit. Faculty expressed isolation in a landscape without industry or external support networks. This isolation was a deficit contributing to students' lack of interest in pursuing further STEM transfer.

Faculty also noted that students might be non-traditional or first-generation students. In addition, faculty identified other possible transfer barriers, including struggles with balancing priorities, not knowing how to fail, lack of confidence, and even mental health. Finally, faculty expressed that students may not have the needed prerequisites and may struggle in math or with upper-division courses that they may experience at the 4-year institution.

Administration and Policy Impact

The administration had a clear impact on the everyday work of RSCC faculty. In some cases, supportive administration and policies were noted. These included good communication channels and overt recognition by the administration of the work done by faculty. Additionally, few faculty noted that accreditation bodies provide favorable policies; they require that best practices focusing on students are implemented. For example, one exercise science faculty noted how these external bodies support faculty work. In the quote below, she is explaining how accreditors allow faculty to know their role in training students, but that the guidelines provided by external bodies may not be understood by supervisors within the college.

We don’t have external accreditors outside of HLC [The Higher Learning Commission]. I think that in and of itself is a unique challenge because we understand what we do, but the

person above me, my director, doesn't, and that's not a knock against her...I wouldn't understand her program either.

The administration was often perceived as a barrier to student-centered work. One faculty member expressed this in a way that showed a sincere disjuncture between her centering on students and her feelings about the administration's priorities.

I don't think our administration, I mean, to be honest, I don't think they put students first, and that's what we do 110% of the time. I mean, when I go, and I get my claws up, and I do, I will go slay dragons, and it's always on the part of something that is not right for the students, it just that can make me madder than anything, and I will go to the mat for students. Other things...[throws hands in the air], whatever...

Challenges faculty expressed in their interactions with administration included a breakdown in communication that signaled feelings of lack of recognition and insecurity about the work faculty do and their impact on students. In addition, as noted by one faculty member, administrator apathy in work done by faculty members was discouraging.

Our administrators, I think, over the years have progressively gotten a little more, I don't know if out of touch is too strong, but they communicate in ways that I think they miss out a lot on what it is we are really doing. And I think there's a lack sometimes of connectedness, and sometimes even appreciation for what we're doing. So it's hard for them to recognize what we do, even when we communicate to them, there seems to be a lack of real authentic interest on their part to really encourage us to try to do more and to do the best possible jobs that we may undertake that may be tied to the community or may be tied to other assignments.

Faculty perceived the administration as reactive, bad at follow-through, and lacking transparency. In contrast, some faculty had experience working in some form of administration and recognized the challenge embedded in the work. Other faculty expressed dissatisfaction with what appeared to them as the administration not pulling their weight, being reluctant to embrace change, being disconnected from faculty, and being fraught with turnover. In the below quote, the faculty member relates how administrative turnover and indifference required faculty to do work that is perceived as not being faculty work.

I've been through a gazillion administrators since I've been here, but I don't think our current administrators pull their weight. We used to have administrators who worked hard to ensure they understood the catalogs, programs, and scheduling...The major issues that faculty deal with, and we didn't have to do that. We're suddenly doing it, we're rewriting the catalog. I mean, it's not our job; it's way above my pay grade. I'm just going to tell you, way above my pay grade already.

For those faculty members with institutional knowledge, tenure, and a long history of *how it has been done*, frustration seemed more acute. In addition, in spaces of high-turnover change, the ambiguity toward different policy stances poses a problem to those who have served in the community. Many faculty felt that the administration was not empathized with our respected. They

yearned for more committee or consultative feedback from faculty to administration and for implementing data-driven policies rather than the perceived politically- or liability-driven decisions.

Emotionally-Heavy and Invisible Work

RSCC faculty expressed that they do a great deal of unpaid and emotionally-heavy work. Therefore, we employ the term *invisible work* to describe the aspects of emotionally-heavy work that are unpaid and not enunciated in the formal job description (Daniels, 1987). For faculty, emotionally-heavy work often included learning new pedagogies, implementing active learning, and designing online courses and syllabi. Advising was expressed as a significant form of invisible work. For example, faculty connect students with internships, co-curriculars, and help with post-grad applications. In addition, they write letters of recommendation, build student relationships, often through extensive out-of-class interaction, and supervise student research. They teach students self-efficacy and how to learn, study, and be in a profession. They articulate across colleges and with student services, complete procurement procedures, and are involved in student recruitment and retention. They related that time spent emailing could drain morale. They not only work with the administration but also take on administrative responsibilities. Overall, RSCC faculty play many critically important roles.

The work of the community college faculty member in engaging with students for supporting transfer was described primarily within the informal and casual conversations outside of class or on the edges of the class. The faculty member helps mentor students through interactions by suggesting internship opportunities, transfer schools, and advising. In addition, RSCC faculty work facilitates knowledge transfer to settings outside of the rural community. For example, in the below quote, a faculty member speaks to the lack of opportunity awareness and the complexity of decision-making facing students. Also evident in this quote is the care that the faculty member takes to center the student within the community while at the same time offering long-term, STEM-based options.

There used to be internships in the summer. In the past, we had several students come down to NASA for a summer internship, but sometimes they walk in and still don't know what the possibilities are. [They would say] I am going to work at Walmart in the summer. And I say, "you could if you want to, or you can go work in the chem lab." So, part of the challenge is getting information, feeding it to them, and giving them the motivation.

An example of the invisible work can be found when faculty describe their navigating the shift from a distributed advising system with faculty advisors to a centralized one with professional advisors. When the administration moved the college toward centralized advising, the role that faculty play as advisors was removed from their job descriptions, and thus they were not compensated for it. However, they still do the job because they can offer things that professional advisors cannot. For example, a faculty member describes the new system:

It's like if you made a connection with a student in a way where they feel comfortable coming to you with their questions about classes. But I believe that the kind of feeling initially was like—that's not your domain. So now it shifted to be it can be, and faculty are potentially an important part. However, there aren't any formal processes, policies, procedures to have faculty be in an advisory capacity.

The RSCC focus groups highlighted the challenges of having no transparency or shifting job requirements. Because RSCC faculty work is primarily teaching and engagement, changing relations in what is counted and what is not creates disjuncture and appears to the faculty to be pulling them away from essential student work. For example, some faculty addressed the want to document service hours to indicate how the faculty member's work extends beyond a typical 9-to-5 job. For example, faculty participated in informal advising and out-of-class work with researchers and students, as well as community and statewide leadership and engagement. Again, this work fell under service to the community with limited policy governance and compensation.

Discord stemming from work requirements not governed by policy texts or connected to ambiguity from the administration created additional faculty stress characteristic of a broader distrust of the institution. RSCC faculty members balance the challenge of the lack of clarity in policy and procedures in different ways subject to their standpoint.

Depending on how frequently those check-the-boxes requests with no explanation or rationale like I, I think it can kind of crush morale and that, may unintentionally be obvious to the student...It's sucking focus and energy from our why, which is our learners in our classrooms that we are building that rapport with and that connection. And I think it can; it can be like an energy vampire.

Participants expressed mixed responses about whether this discord between administration and faculty relations would trickle into the classroom and impact their relations with students. Many faculty expressed that they worked hard to protect their student work from the discord in the institution. However, the analogy of the "energy vampire" signals that some faculty acknowledge and make concessions that some work not directly related to faculty-student relations does impact the student.

By listening to participants describe their intentions to engage with the policy-making apparatus of the community college, we see their increased desire to sanction their work through texts. Our focus group discourses further highlighted the faculty's desire for policies and processes that better supported their faculty-student work relationship. Though RSCC faculty are engaged in the administrative work in the community college through serving on committees inside and outside the college, this work is less connected to their work with the student and less transparent. Faculty morale is impacted when faculty-student relationships are left out of this work and policy decisions affecting the work with the student are made without a clear rationale. As exemplified by the quote below, morale is again affected when additional policy and organizational function area changes are made because of decreasing funding or increasing resource constraints rather than students' best interests.

I know it's policy, but it's money. It's all about money. When we were doing embedded tutoring, having students go to class, and then students would be comfortable using [tutors] afterward. [We wanted] to give some release time to faculty, then they will come up and do some tutoring, and that's all gone away.

Furthermore, looking at the documents that mediate the work and the relationship between the faculty and the student makes the distinction between the document and the actuality more apparent (Smith, 1987). One example of a document representing invisible faculty work is letters of recommendation. Letters of recommendation stand in for the care and the time spent by the

faculty with the student. They require a relationship built through repeated interactions. Furthermore, the faculty in writing the letter uses her or his reputation to vouch for the student. Faculty find writing letters of recommendation an essential and emotional aspects of their student work, as noted in the below quote.

So, when I was teaching calculus, I worked a lot with many students who came to me asking for things like letters of recommendation for scholarships or different summer programs they were trying to get into, and so that was something I cared about; I wanted to help them with that and did.

Faculty identify the varied texts that guide their work in writing letters for recruiting, creating program plans for advising, and writing letters for students who aspire to transfer. These texts document the care and relationship building that are formative aspects of faculty work for student transfer. RSCC social capital and networks are used to advance the student through texts. Student success and achievements along established faculty networks are emblematic of their influence and place them on the front lines of student work in transfer. Faculty in our focus groups said that they liked it that way because it draws them closer to student success. For example, in the quote below, a faculty explains how the same connections were made for them and were instrumental to their success.

I keep all my documents from when I was an undergrad. I have all my transcripts from high school, college, and grad school. I have all my internship letters from the various labs I've worked at. I have all my acceptance letters to graduate schools that I had gotten accepted into; I even have a stack of rejection letters, you know, and I just showed them here was my route of going here first and doing this, doing that. And this was, these were my grades. This was what people said about me. This is what I had to go through and all of the ups and downs and all the different crashes that go into being a professional.

These texts can decrease isolation and bridge the gap between regionally inaccessible STEM opportunities and the professions. Additionally, these texts negotiate the actuality of the out-of-class experiences and the unpaid invisible work of the faculty that form the relationships for which these texts stand.

Social Relations Organized Around Technology

In a landscape of increasing resource constraints, RSCC faculty members expressed their disdain for efficiency measures used to consolidate work areas and decrease costs and how they impacted the student. These efforts to specialize through functional areas impacted faculty-student relationships. In addition, they relied on the increased adoption of technology and information management systems.

At all participant colleges, faculty focus group participants expressed the drive to greater online instruction as a point of tension between what faculty saw as good for the student and what the administration was telling them. Participants acknowledged how online learning could allow for greater outreach of courses to more remote areas and older age demographics and how their administration sees it as having the potential to increase enrollment. However, participants also

expressed concern that their work to connect with the student would be lost in favor of a more standardized curriculum. One faculty member described this paradox of online learning this way.

So we almost have a paradigm shift. I mean, we just have different groups of people. So, to me personally, I prefer to [teach in person], but you're talking about partnerships and connectedness... But I think that connectedness...I don't think every student can handle an online class, and I don't think it's the best delivery method, but sometimes, just for some groups, it's the only delivery method.

A biology faculty member from another college recounted their administration's approach to shifting online, stating:

Now they do try and force like online, you know, completely online labs, there's pressure, (but we are fighting it). So there is a little pressure from the administration to do things that are not in the student's best interests [and] are somewhat dishonest, you know, trying to make online labs...But, you know, I understand there's a need for more students, more money. So they're not saying this out of spite. But no, otherwise I think they're relatively supportive, though they don't provide a lot of equipment for biology labs.

Some RSCC faculty participants expressed dislike when their everyday work became more specialized and limited only to their disciplinary expertise. These faculty members wanted to be recognized for their contributions to excellent teaching over their expertise in the STEM field.

I mean, yeah, people want to say we're experts in our field, and I don't want to poo poo what we're doing, but, speaking for myself, I'm a community college educator, cause I want to teach...And if there's a disconnect, if there's an isolation that I sometimes feel from the faculty stance versus the administrator stance, is it just that they see us as experts in our field.

An additional way that another former faculty and now faculty developer stated this concern about being marginalized due to technology was found in the relations of his position as a faculty developer, being moved from academic affairs to technology support. He expressed the attitude of the administration not recognizing the faculty-development work being done to help solve student concerns, being one based on technological support and not relationship building as one pushing him away. This feeling that a dualism conceptualized in this work was continually draining was exemplified in this comment.

You know that in just the 20 years, I said multiple factors, and I think maybe I'm starting to wear now. So yeah, I think I'm being worn down, just normal wear and tear. This is the attitude that is pushing me away.

Feelings of Connection and Isolation

Some RSCC faculty expressed isolation in the void left when colleagues depart. They expressed the feeling of vacancy, feeling that "no one is here anymore." Those working off campus expressed distance as a form of isolation. Likewise, department siloing or perceptions of STEM as a "boys club" were noted as isolating. Some faculty felt that isolation stemmed from being in a

landscape without industry or external support networks. When communication was perceived as dysfunctional, morale was low, or feelings of being devalued were present, this further contributed to isolation. Others noted that they felt isolated when doing work that did not directly benefit students or faculty.

Connection stemmed from having a close department, collegiality, and colleagues who felt like family and advice givers. At all of our participating community colleges, faculty spoke about the support provided by fellow faculty. While different faculty members expressed variable relationships to the network, they spoke about these connections as lessening isolation. The below quote speaks to the importance of colleagues as advice-givers.

I think having that support with your colleagues and those who [you] go to get feedback. And that is such an important part of what we do. You know, I think we have a great department and integrated goals. So, we have a really good working relationship, and I know that if there is anything I need, any of those people will be there.

Additionally, one faculty member explicitly related the importance of physical proximity to their colleagues.

So I feel like I can go to anyone, you know, so one of our faculty members not here right now, the other bio professor, like we are physically close. So, it's very easy to go to him, but I feel like I can reach out to anyone else...I could reach out and get advice, help people, you know, struggling [with] things, student issues...

Faculty noted that the small college network and small class size nurtured feelings of connection. The connection is also derived from cross-college networks and academic and professional networks. Some participants related that statewide networks could build connections across the disciplines and even interdisciplinarily support and re-engage them and their students. In the quote below, a faculty member speaks about the impact of a grant-funded university program called INBRE (the IDEA Networks for Biomedical Research Excellence Program). The program aims to enhance research capacity statewide and fund biomedical research opportunities for undergraduate students.

It was very lonely, intellectually, until I became involved in INBRE, and INBRE, to me, the statewide network, and also our local [community college] network, is the most fulfilling thing because I have intellectual colleagues, and some of the colleagues are students.

RSCC educators also noted that students nurture feelings of connection. Active learning course development was identified as a contributor to these connections because of team collaboration and more communication between student-student and student-faculty. For example, in the quote below, a chemistry faculty member relates how this shift enabled him to better connect with his students' needs.

The students are really the key, and now in active learning, you know, it's good because I could see more frustrations on students before they sit there on their phones or doing whatever.

Through relationship building within active and team-based learning, faculty gained more connection with their students. Additionally, some faculty members used surveys to learn about their students' aspirations and how they oriented the STEM course within their goals. Finally, aligning the course content to career trajectories and the completion of degrees, even if the course content is part of general education, helped the teacher build connections with the students and have the empathy to address students' hardships on the journey.

Connecting with the students through capstone courses and extracurricular research in these labs bridged the community college faculty across the state and provided additional financial and academic support for students. Connecting the students to research practices was supportive, securing the experiences that made students competitive for transfer to bachelor's, graduate, and professional degree programs. Additionally, when the RSCC faculty member saw the student as an intellectual colleague, the opportunities within the student's reach seemed to expand. However, these expanded research opportunities were not openly available to all students due to resource availability and other space or institutional constraints. The faculty were primarily the ones who determined which students were advised to pursue additional research opportunities.

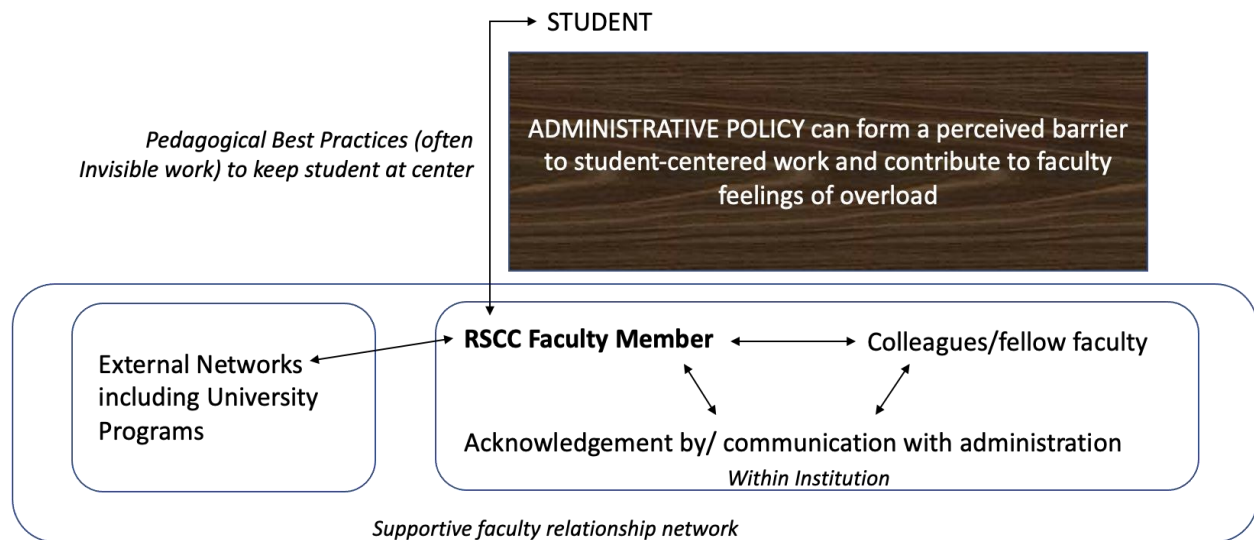
Discussion

Our study focus groups took the stance of and provided space for RSCC faculty in Wyoming to authenticate their knowing. Faculty members' embodied knowing was shared in words and through emotions sometimes visible through tears. We looked at the texts and the absence of texts and how this portrays and impacts faculty work. Overall, we were able to explicate the ruling relations wherein the RSCC administrators' roles and actions depicted that the student was not always at the center of decision-making for administrators as opposed to students being the guiding light for RSCC faculty work. Overall, the thematic areas that emerged from our IE are discussed below, illuminating questions such as: Whose interests are being served in rural institutions? Moreover, how do politics and power play into this everyday work at each college?

Our findings agree with other studies in that they showcase how RSCC faculty and staff coordinate their actions and organize their daily lives around critical notions of the value of labor, access, and institutional mission (LaFrance & Nicolas, 2012, p. 133). For example, the themes of our work, when considered through an IE lens, elucidate a research problematic.

Herein, we describe the understanding that faculty have about best practices in teacher-student relationship building and how that grinds with administrative policies and overwork that create barriers to building those relationships. There is an implicit tension in this paradox. The faculty want to maintain students at the center of their work despite the ever-encroaching barriers caused by ruling relations. They perceive themselves as continuing to do the student-centered and community-serving work that they know to be important despite the barriers that are present in the administrative policy. This work becomes invisible work in addition to being heavy and exhausting. However, faculty express that the positive relationship networks maintained with fellow faculty colleagues, supportive administrators, and external support networks support them in doing the heavy work. We aim to depict this complex problem in Figure 1(next page).

Figure 1: *Problematic of RSCC Faculty Members Supporting Students Despite Administrative Barriers*



Note. This model shows that the RSCC faculty member relies on a supportive relationship network to overcome the barriers of administrative policy. Practices part of the RSCC toolkit to bridge these barriers include pedagogical work and caring to keep students at the center of the community college's mission.

Academic isolation has been shown to decrease job satisfaction and contribute to struggles with mental health (Belkhir et al., 2019; Ponjuan et al., 2011; Sullivan & Baruch, 2009). Relationships between educators are vital to enabling positive change (Daly et al., 2010). RSCC faculty members spoke about their feelings of connection as they derived from colleagues in their daily work landscape. Within the framework of IE, these relationship networks are essential to creating the daily world experienced by educators. IE recognizes relationships as the “connections that hold the thing together” (DeVault, 1999, p. 50). The relationships fluctuate but are material and physically tangible (DeVault, 1999). We find it particularly striking that educators spoke descriptively about the materiality of the relationships, one noting, “like we were close like we’re physically close. So, you know, it’s very easy to go to him...” The importance of this physically accessible source of connection seemed particularly palpable in the post-COVID testaments. Through RSCC faculty members’ discourses around isolation and connectedness, we could also see where holes exist in the network. Faculty spoke emotionally about losing key network members and clarified how this decreased their ability to support rural students’ learning and higher education attainment.

RSCC faculty related a heavy and unpaid workload outside their job description. This type of work has long been referred to as *invisible work*—a term coined by Arlene Kaplan Daniels in 1987. Many scholars have since used it to refer to many types of labor, including but not limited to emotional labor (Hatton, 2017). The latter is particularly applicable to our focus group participants as they spoke about the invisible work of writing letters of recommendation and supporting students through unpaid advising, advice-giving, and mentoring. This heavy invisible work manifests in ruling relations as policies such as centralized advising that give the facade of removing the load from faculty members. However, functionally the faculty continue to be the students’ nearest advice givers, so advising becomes invisible work. Invisible work economically devalues certain types of work, and in so doing, it marginalizes that type of work (Hatton, 2017). This work

is often essential to minority and marginalized students, and thus the overt devaluing of it only serves to disadvantage these students further.

However, despite feelings of overload, faculty often overtly stated that their overwork did not affect their students despite what is known about how students are highly impacted by instructors (Rokach, 2016). Thompson (2001) studied community college students and showed that informal student-faculty interaction directly influenced the effort community college students exerted in science courses. Moreover, teacher-student relationships have an affective dimension, including honesty (Hagenauer & Volet, 2014). It seems unlikely that overloaded instructors can spend as much informal time with students or honestly relate happiness when they feel overloaded. We believe the paradox in these two themes to be significant and bring it to the forefront here to enable our readers to consider the dissonance. From our standpoint, we recognize that this paradox lies in the lack of control faculty feel in affecting the ruling relations over them, but they maintain that they can control how they rule over students.

Located knowing was also seen in our focus groups in which faculty expressed place-based impacts on their own and their student's experiences. Feelings ranged from expressions of the strong connection to the natural lands to impacts of isolation in rural spaces. However, RSCCs varied and were directly impacted by regional industries and resource bases. Gaining this knowledge about each community college context enables us to utilize an ecological perspective when designing curricula for our planned learning communities at each institution (Gibbons et al., 2019). We will aim to knit in each institution's cultural and land-based uniquenesses to maximize our work's effect on opening inclusive pathways to continued STEM education.

Practice Implications

Through the conversations that emerged from the focus groups, we agree with Finnegan (2019) that RSCC faculty serve many roles to support their students' learning success. However, RSCC faculty also described characteristics of the space that impacted the roles and work completed with their students. For example, isolation and the lack of connection to STEM industries were points of struggle but finding networks to reconnect across the state through research or teaching networks was supportive. In addition, the faculty offered the following points as ways to address the unique challenges and opportunities found in this space:

- Eliminate and transform discourses about students' "deficits," regarding the spatial processes of transfer as one where students attempt to move to a new and different environment but may return due to a lack of confidence and insecurity in those environments.
- Be mindful of the impacts of high turnover and short tenure. Faculty networks support morale, allow educators to do multidimensional student work, and utilize all function areas to support the student.
- Utilize transparency in administrative policy-making and consultative feedback mechanisms to hook RSCC faculty into the practices that impact work with supporting students.
- Support intra and inter-institutional and interdisciplinary research that adds network ties across the state and supporting student-faculty work. Recognize this work as supporting community engagement and student success and transfer.

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Culture Shifts: The Influence of Organizational Changes on Staff Culture & Students' School Experiences

Adrienne C. Goss

Abstract

This evaluative case study focused on how organizational changes—specifically a new directional system—affected staff culture in a rural Midwestern school district. This work was theoretically grounded in Owens and Valesky's school climate model. Through observations, interviews, and a review of documents, I determined that the new directional system led to cultural changes among the staff that also had a positive impact on students. Specifically, the directional system informed the district's hiring practices, incentivized the exploration of new teaching strategies, and inspired teachers to adopt a growth mindset. In short, it changed who was in the building, what they taught, and how they assessed—themselves and their students.

Keywords: school climate, staff culture, organizational change, rural schools, school reform

Introduction

What would it take to make school irresistible to students? Taylor Local School District (TLSD, pseudonym), a rural school district in the Midwest, sought to answer this question while designing a new PK-12 building to support its innovative directional system. This system incorporated new instructional strategies, including service learning, project-based learning, co teaching, differentiation, subject integration, and technology integration. The district opened the building in 2015 with the hope that it had created a supportive, collaborative, technology-rich space for teachers as they experimented with instructional strategies. The district's efforts were based on a core desire to increase student engagement, prepare them for meaningful careers, and make learning “irresistible.” This paper is based on findings from a larger qualitative case study which examined the effects of the district's reforms on staff culture and student learning experiences. This present work examines how organizational changes in the form of a new directional system affected staff culture, which in turn impacted students' experiences in school.

Education reform in rural communities does not necessarily align with state or national educational policy priorities (Butler, 2014; Gagnon, 2016; Ruecker, 2022; Sher, 2018). Federal policy reform has attempted to change staff culture through the dismantling of teacher union protections, and the removal of so-called “ineffective” teachers and leaders based on student performance on standardized exams. Educational policy has typically assumed access to a sufficient number of qualified teachers who can be leveraged during school closures, the creation of new

charter schools, and other school turnaround measures (Gagnon, 2016). The logic of such neoliberal policies is misguided, but especially detrimental in rural areas that already struggle to recruit and retain teachers (Butler, 2014).

Federal-level policies have also attempted to reform schools through curricula. The 2009 Race to the Top grants incentivized states to adopt college- and career-ready standards at the same time that a consortium of state leaders collaborated to develop the Common Core standards in math and English language arts. Given the history of inequitable learning opportunities for students from different backgrounds in the U.S., there is certainly merit in ensuring that all students are held to the same academic standards. Yet there is also value in grounding students' learning in their communities. Rural schools that embrace place-based education tend to recognize their communities as educational resources, and they cultivate learning experiences that are responsive to their local communities. Decisions on what and how to teach will necessarily include state standards, but these decisions will also incorporate their communities' needs and values. Nevertheless, rural education reform advocates can learn from advocates in other areas, as debates about how to reform urban and rural districts often create an unnecessary divide between the two camps. While standards-based reform advocates would benefit from learning to ground students in an education that is responsive to their local communities, rural reform advocates could learn to work toward more equitable and multicultural learning experiences (Gruenewald, 2003; Kannapel, 2000).

Historically, education reforms have done little to change how students experience school (Hess, 1998; Payne, 2013). Rather, the end result has often focused on making existing practices more efficient (Schlechty, 2009). To transform a school and create an entirely new experience for students and staff, there must be a change in the school's culture and structure (Schlechty, 2009). The reform efforts taken at TLSD, grounded in the district's values, involved a new directional system which led to noticeable changes in the staff culture. This culture change resulted from new hiring practices, use of new instructional strategies, and a shift in how teachers assessed themselves and their students. These cultural changes ultimately impacted students' experiences in school. Unlike federal reforms which are imposed from the top down, these changes were grounded in the district's values and developed in collaboration with teachers.

Theoretical Framework

For this study I employed use of Owens and Valesky's (2015) school climate model to illustrate the interaction among four interrelated dimensions: ecology, organization, staff culture, and student milieu. "*Climate* is generally defined as the characteristics of the total environment in a school building" (Owens & Valesky, 2015, p. 185). A visual of a Venn diagram with each of the four dimensions overlapping is in Figure 1 (next page).

Figure 1: School Climate Model¹



Ecology refers to the material elements of a school, such as facilities and technology. Organization refers to the way a school operates, including teaching and planning practices, scheduling, and curriculum. Milieu refers to the “social dimension in the organization, which includes almost everything relating to the people in the organization” (Owens & Valesky, 2015, p. 186). Culture is “a system of shared values and beliefs” which interact with people, structures, and systems to produce behavioral norms (Owens & Valesky, 2015, p. 189). Culture is “both a product and a process” (Bolman & Deal, 2008). It is the result of years of experience, but also is recreated as new people join, learn, and share in the organization’s culture. The values that are expressed on paper or in organizational documents matter far less than the values that are lived (Bolman & Deal, 2008). Although it has long been ignored or taken for granted, organizational culture is critical to a school’s success (Teasley, 2016).

Ecology, milieu, organization, and culture “are the levers for change available to the school leader who seeks to shift the organizational climate of a school” (Owens & Valesky, 2015, p. 195). The value of this model is that it shows how organization, staff culture, and student milieu intersect, such that organizational decisions regarding teaching and planning practices, scheduling, and curriculum can influence staff culture and thereby affect student experiences. One limitation

1. Copyright permission has already been requested to reprint this image. The original comes from Neil Gislason (2009) Mapping School Design: A Qualitative Study of the Relations Among Facilities Design, Curriculum Delivery, and School Climate, *The Journal of Environmental Education*, 40:4, 17-34, DOI: 10.3200/JOEE.40.4.17-34.

of this model is that Owens and Valesky did not describe the extent to which each dimension relates to the other in schools (Gislason, 2009).

The Context of Taylor Local School District

TLSD is a small rural district in the Midwest, home to a large community of Old Order Amish. When driving in to Taylor from my home or my job nearby, busy streets with traffic lights and local businesses turned to long state roads shared with horses and buggies. Spread out on either side of the road were houses with propane tanks, barns, and expanses of farmland where cows, horses, and sheep roamed on warm days.

At the time of this study, TLSD enrolled 488 students. Of those, 460 (94.1%) were white, non-Hispanic. Roughly 29.9% of the students were from families experiencing economic hardship, and 11.8% were students with disabilities (“State” School Report Cards, District Details). Although the district has had many successes, it has struggled to meet consistent expectations on the state’s standardized exams. There is a tension between these state requirements and the culture of the district. The district includes a statement on its website that reads, “while you will see grades assigned to us by the State...they do not tell our story.” Based on this statement and my time in the district, I learned that doing well on the state’s standardized exams was important, but insufficient to capture the enormity of what they were accomplishing in other areas, and definitely not reflective of the district’s core values. TLSD was nationally renowned for its achievements in agriculture, having earned top awards annually in state and national Future Farmers of America (FFA) competitions. Every fall, the school takes a week-long break so that students can participate in the county fair. The district is heavily influenced by its setting, but is not defined solely by it. As one of the high school students described it,

Even though we're an ag-[agricultural] based school, it doesn't even feel like just ag. When people think of ag, they think of farmers. Everybody there is a farmer. Everybody who is going to leave is a farmer—no. We're a bunch of different people that have come together to do similar things but in different ways.

Students from the district have been recognized at the county and state levels for accomplishments in art, athletics, and academics in addition to agriculture. The town is small, but the students are exposed regularly to the world around them, through annual field trips to other states and overseas.

TLSD tackled two major changes at the same time—their physical structure (with a new building), and their organizational structure. Both could be traced back to the hiring of the district’s former superintendent. Joy, the agricultural education teacher described the changes this way:

There were some teachers who believed strongly in service learning when we started this. Um, at the same time we had an administrative change, almost an entire administration changed, so we lost a superintendent, principal, athletic director—all that core had left. And our school board had the vision to understand the person they hired had to do business differently. Because we, I remember saying this to the school board when we were hiring [the former superintendent], that we’re on the cusp of greatness.

Because of the turnover of leadership and the unusual opportunity that the district had, Joy felt that

the school board was uniquely positioned to do something amazing with the district, and therefore was supportive of organizational changes.

Organizational Changes in TLSD

Organization refers to the way a school operates, including teaching and planning practices, scheduling, and curriculum. The physical changes to the district in the form of a new building facilitated collaboration across grade levels, student autonomy over their learning, and improved student and staff morale. Yet this physical change did not occur in isolation; the district had already adopted a new directional system whose implementation started shortly before moving into the new building. The district's directional system and supports to make the directional system successful helped to define the organizational structure of the district.

The Directional System

TLSD's directional system included its core beliefs, vision, mission, principles, and instructional strategies. The superintendent explained, "every decision that we make, whether it's providing teacher PD [professional development], whether it's providing something for students, we're constantly going back to that [directional system] saying, 'Is this what we believe in?' 'Is this what we want for our kids?' 'Is this going to help them be better at what they do?'" The directional system centered the learning experience on "student voice, passion, and ownership." The district's mission statement expressed a commitment to "create partnerships with our families and community which broaden minds to learn and serve through collaboration, innovation, and rigorous academics for life's learning journey."

To achieve this mission, the district supported teachers in adopting seven instructional strategies: (a) service learning, (b) project-based learning, (c) co-teaching (across disciplines and grade levels), (d) differentiation, (e) subject integration, (f) technology integration, and (g) designing engaging work. The superintendent explained that engaging work was at the core, like the center of a flower, with the remaining six strategies like the petals of that flower. These seven strategies supported the district's principles, namely that the district was transitioning from a bureaucratic institution to a learning organization characterized by "service and project-based learning that addresses real world problems for real world audiences," "customized student learning based on student need and readiness which uses technology as a primary tool," and "deeper, amplified learning" which makes the first two principles "purposeful and engaging to students." The district also expressed belief "in the freedom to fail and grow as we explore new ways to think and do," which, in conversations with teachers and students, emerged as a belief in a growth mindset. The district relied on a District Leadership Team (DLT) to mentor teachers in instructional strategies.

District Supports

The success of the district's directional system relied on the investment of resources. TLSD supported and encouraged teachers with the instructional strategies through collaborative planning time, implementation bonuses, and professional development.

Collaborative Planning Time. The teacher contract gave administrators permission to build common planning time into the teachers' schedule. Having the time structured into the day and as part of the teacher contract helped to address one common barrier to collaborative planning—not having the time.

Implementation Bonus. A second source of support was through implementation bonuses (IBs). Each teacher in the district was eligible for up to a \$2,000 bonus annually upon completion of a “high quality implementation” of any one of the district instructional strategies. Teachers wrote the rubrics used to assess the IB.

Professional Development. A third source of support was professional development. The school district funded many of the professional development opportunities for teachers. Participants primarily discussed professional development focused on designing engaging work, or implementing service learning. The superintendent reported that approximately 75% of the staff has participated in some training on designing engaging work. Teachers identified this structured, Schlechty-inspired professional development as a district priority.

Methodology Design

This project began as an evaluative case study. As defined by Merriam (2009), a case study is “an in-depth description and analysis of a bounded system” (p. 40). This study was “bounded” in that the research focused specifically on the Taylor Local School District. It was evaluative in that it involved “description, explanation, and judgment” (Merriam, 2009, p. 49). My goal was not to judge as an authority on what the district should be doing, but rather to learn if the directional system was making a difference in how teachers and students experienced school. Evaluations that assess instrumental effectiveness are process evaluations, wherein one might monitor daily tasks and/or assess program activities (Patton, 2015). Process evaluations assess whether or not a program has actually been implemented and to what extent. Studying organizational climate “is the study of *perceptions* that individuals have of various aspects of the environment in the organization” (Owens & Valesky, 2015, p. 199). The study of organizational culture therefore requires conversations with people and examination of symbols that “reveal their assumptions, their beliefs, and the values to which they subscribe” (p. 199). Thus, it is not necessary to attempt to show how changes to the organization contributed to quantifiable student or teacher outcomes. A qualitative case study was ideal for this process evaluation because it is descriptive in nature, and can generate multiple types of data to gain a thorough understanding of what was happening in the district (Merriam, 2009; Patton, 2015; Stake, 2005).

Methods

I began this study in 2017 with open-ended fieldwork—classroom observations, unstructured interviews, and review of documents. I later added formal interviews and focus group interviews. In all, I observed 9 classes and 1 community event held at the school. I conducted semi-structured interviews with 11 faculty/staff and 3 community members. Whenever possible, I tried to observe one class taught by each teacher that I interviewed. I initially sought to interview parents as a separate category but because of the small size of the district, several teachers and community members were also parents, or former parents, of students in the district.

I conducted 6 focus group interviews with 11 students across the elementary, junior, and senior high schools. I met with each group twice. I followed recommendations for focus groups with children. Each group was comprised of no more than 6 students who were no more than 2 years apart in development (Gibson, 2012; Singleton, 2015). I began each focus group by introducing myself and establishing ground rules, including the opportunity for them to ask questions, and the right to pass on a question (Gibson, 2012; Singleton, 2015). To corroborate and clarify findings, I reviewed several documents, including district organizing framework documents, district newsletters, local online newspapers, and videos. I also reviewed five years' worth of monthly school board meeting minutes, starting with the first set of publicly available minutes in 2013 (after the bond measure passed which allowed the district to construct the new building) through 2017 (the year I began in-person data collection). I used these data sources to create a timeline to help me better understand the chronology of developments in the district prior to my arrival in the field.

Analysis

Inductive analysis is an approach to “derive concepts, themes, or a model” from detailed readings of raw data (Thomas, 2006). Although evaluation objectives guided analysis initially, they ultimately were not used as “a set of expectations about specific findings” (Thomas, 2006, p. 239). I did start my process using the district framework as a guide for deductive coding, but I quickly realized that what was in writing on the district framework failed to capture what the participants were sharing with me, so I changed direction (Stake, 1995). I returned to my first interview and experimented with inductive coding using grounded theory methods (Charmaz, 2010). I began to see stronger patterns in the data, so I conducted a second round of inductive thematic coding, revising categories as needed, so that I could then sort the data in the cloud-based program *Dedoose*.

Next, I excerpted the data according to theme. I conducted a third round of coding of these excerpts using grounded theory methods. I began to notice relationships among themes that could form a framework. I returned to the literature to discover an established school climate framework that added explanatory power to my findings. With some modifications, I used this framework to guide the remainder of my analysis. I approached this work systematically and maintained a detailed audit trail (Lub, 2015).

Findings

The district's organizational changes, as articulated in the directional system, contributed to changes in staff culture. It 1) informed the new hiring practices; 2) incentivized exploration of new teaching strategies; and 3) inspired some teachers to adopt a growth mindset. In short, the directional system changed who was in the building, what they taught, and how they assessed. In turn, these changes had an effect on student milieu—how students grew and experienced school.

New Hiring Practices

The directional system altered the district's approach to hiring new staff, thereby shifting what values, beliefs, and practices were brought into the district. This made a noticeable shift in the staff culture. One teacher identified the district's hiring practices as the most critical factor in

changing the culture of the school. She described her experiences sitting in on a teacher candidate’s interview:

And in the very beginning, before, when we were first transitioning to this, and when we hired our math teacher that we’d hired, and I remember this interview, the guy said “I don’t think I’m comfortable co-teaching.” And we said “well maybe this isn’t the right place for you.” And he said, “yeah I think it’s not.”

This teacher went on to explain that even “great people cannot fit into this situation.” It was essential that any new teacher that the district hired shared the philosophy of the school. She continued,

But our intentional hiring practices have altered the culture of this building quicker than anything because the people we have coming in believe in this vision of designing the future and the process for which we’ve created and really have hopped on board and said “okay I don’t exactly understand exactly how to do service learning, but can you help me?”

Likely because much of the staff turnover was in the high school, the high school students were more aware of the difference that hiring had made. As one high school student noted,

When we got the new school, we hired a couple new staff members and that helped a lot because our staff members, they work together a lot on our collaboration, but they're open minded and they care. That's not to say that we didn't have that at the old building, but it wasn't as high of a level of care. But here, it's crazy [how much they care].

As the student noted above, of course, there were open minded, caring teachers who shared the district’s philosophy before the district changes, but the significant cultural changes required more staff who aligned with where the district was going. The directional system was designed to inform the district’s work, including the hiring of staff and faculty who shared the district’s values.

Exploration of Teaching Strategies

After the district adopted the new directional system, it used the implementation bonus (IB) to incentivize teachers to explore new teaching strategies. From the start of the IB in 2016 through the end of 2018, approximately half of the teachers in the district participated in any given semester. Research participants noted that the level of difficulty with each IB rubric varied, and some were not willing to attempt strategies with more cumbersome rubrics. The most popular choices for the IB were differentiation, co-teaching, and service-learning/ project-based learning (see Tables 1 and 2).

Table 1: *IB Participation by Instructional Strategy*

	Fall 2016	Spring 2017*	Fall 2017	Spring 2018	Fall 2018	Total
Differentiation	2	11	13	7	9	42

Technology Integration	2	0	0	0	0	2
Service Learning/ Project-Based Learning	0	0	4	8	5	17
Co-Teaching	13	2	2	4	0	21
Subject Integration	1	1	0	0	0	2
Designing Engaging Work**	-	-	-	-	5	5
Multiple Strategies***	4	4	-	1	-	

*Note: The superintendent was unable to access raw data for Spring 2017 and is unable to verify the accuracy of the estimates for this semester.

**Not available as a district strategy until Fall 2018.

***Some teachers chose to work on two or more strategies during the same semester.

Table 2: IB Participation by Semester

	Fall 2016	Spring 2017*	Fall 2017	Spring 2018	Fall 2018
Number of Teachers Participating	22	13	19	20	19
Number of Teachers in District	40	40	40	40	39
Rate of Participation	55%	32.5%	47.5%	50%	48.7%

While differentiation had the highest participation rate, service learning had its fingerprints all over the district. Service learning was an instructional strategy in the district, particularly in the agriculture program, for roughly a decade before the district implemented the new directional system. Teachers expressed a commitment to service learning even when it was not one of their strategies for pursuing the IB. For instance, the art teacher supported an Empty Bowls/Fill the Bowls service learning project by having students create pottery in her classroom to sell at the fundraising event. The K-3 team started a composting project before the district began the IB, and they continued to have long-term goals for developing a school garden.

Although service learning is designed to connect academic curriculum to community involvement, teachers and administrators were the only ones to explicitly connect service learning

to academic standards. High school students talked about how service learning gave them opportunities to demonstrate agency and grow as leaders. Junior high students echoed the development of leadership skills; identified the fun aspects of service learning, such as the “pencil wars,” a schoolwide competition to collect school supplies for under-resourced schools in Africa; and noted how it helped them think about “a bigger picture” and “how we can help other people in different environments.” Elementary students, who were too young to participate in FFA, seemed to believe that service learning was only for junior and senior high students.

Regardless of the level of understanding of service learning, nearly everyone at every level appeared to be engaged in some way. At the elementary level, students engaged in work that was ultimately used in service to the community. For instance, early elementary students created artwork that was auctioned to raise money; third graders made Valentine’s cards for service women and men overseas; and kindergarteners presented the results of their composting projects to the school board. In 2017, a new class on Designing the Future was developed for 8th graders. The course helped students reflect on their passions, talents, and career aspirations, and included service-learning projects. Service learning appeared to be most prominent in the agriculture program, however, which engaged the entire high school, or roughly a quarter of the building’s student population.

Service learning was prominent in my observations, the documents I reviewed, and conversations with teachers and students, but there was clear evidence of other strategies being employed. Several teachers engaged in co-teaching, particularly at the elementary level. It was the most popular IB during the first year (2016), although the rate of participation quickly tapered off. One pair of teachers shared that they “thought it would be easier” to co-teach and “didn’t think it would take as long to learn to do efficiently.” In my observations, co-teaching appeared to overlap with differentiation, as teachers ran different activities with different groups of children. During the time of this study, only two teachers attempted the technology IB. One teacher noted,

I thought about doing technology, but the thing about technology that kind of scared me on the IB bonus is that they want you to do things...that you couldn't otherwise do without technology...I think the technology one would be difficult.

Another teacher joked about how the IB for technology integration is “a bear” meaning it was so burdensome that it gave the “feeling of it being unattainable.” Technology was everywhere in the school, however, and utilized frequently. Students drew on iPads in art class, engaged in activities projected on SMART boards, and programmed robots in STEM class. While I was observing a STEM class, one student let me play with his vehicle and taught me how to drive it. A girl in his group then proceeded to tell me all about the class. The boy who let me play with his group’s vehicle interjected repeatedly and when the period ended, he yelled out for “five more hours!” It was one of the most energetic classes that I observed, and some of the students even shared what they were learning at a school board meeting.

Sharing what gets learned happened regularly in the district. “Showcases,” where teachers shared what they were doing with others across the district, started before the IB, but afterward these showcases allowed teachers who participated in the IB to share what they did for the IB. One teacher insisted that the showcase “was the best professional development last year.” She said that during this professional development, “These teachers were sharing individual data points for every kid and saying this is the differentiation strategy, this is the co-teaching strategy, this is the

service learning strategy, and this is how we're moving kids." A K-3 teacher explained how sharing during the showcase inspired the kindergarten and third grade teachers to start a book study on *Teach Like a Pirate*.

Teach Like a Pirate, it was based on the implementation bonus. That was something [a teacher] shared, and then because she was so excited about it, we were all like, "Oh, we want to do that!"...In her presentation, she referred to it and was excited about it and said great things about it, so that inspired us to want to read this book to get all these good ideas. That's where that sparked from.

Another influential professional development started before the district began implementation bonuses. Theresa, a kindergarten teacher, was part of a group of teachers that participated in a book study on Carol Dweck's *The Growth Mindset*. Theresa said, "It was a great book. It meant a lot to us and we got a lot from it. Then we shared about it at our showcase, which inspired other teachers to want to read the book also." In this way, the IB incentivized teachers to try new strategies, and through sharing these strategies during the showcase, it indirectly motivated other teachers to try new things.

Growth Mindset

The directional system did not use the term "growth mindset" explicitly, but it did note an expressed belief "in the freedom to fail and grow as we explore new ways to think and do." The concept of growth was noted frequently in interviews with staff. The administration encouraged teachers to try new things and not be afraid to make mistakes. The superintendent told me, "we encourage people to make mistakes, not in a bad way, but you know we call it a growth mindset. We encourage people to try something and if it's a mistake, how do we get better at that?" The focus on growth was also likely inspired, at least in part, from the book study on growth mindset some of the teachers chose to do, and additional professional development on the topic. The concept of growth appeared to influence staff culture, particularly what they valued, what they believed to be true, and behavioral norms. It influenced the language that they used with students and each other, and it influenced their teaching and assessment practices.

Belief in growth mindset affected teachers' practices and language. The teachers' embrace of the growth mindset manifested in their language used with students, and in their teaching and assessment practices. One teacher shared that instead of students saying "can't," students have learned to say, "I will try, I will do my best, I'll put forth my best effort." The teacher added, "We talked with the kids how, 'The reason that everyone's learning different things at different times is because we all came to kindergarten knowing different things, and so everyone's working at their own pace from where they started,' and how, 'Your effort that you put into things can help you move, but it's just showing growth.'"

The belief in the growth mindset manifested in the teachers' vocabulary even when they were not teaching. Consider the following exchange between two K-3 teachers while discussing a glass garage door that replaces part of a wall facing into the hallway:

Teacher 1: I like the window being there. I don't care about it going up and down.

Teacher 2: The door, the garage door.

Teacher 1: The garage door part of it. I like the window itself, but I just don't need the open

and close. We don't really—we haven't found, yet, a way that that is needed.

Teacher 2: Yeah. I like your growth mind, [Teacher 1].

Teacher 1: Maybe there will be a time that we'll find the perfect thing, we just haven't found it yet that we need that.

The first teacher started to focus on the negative aspects of having the glass door, but then shifted her language to show that there is potential in the door that has not yet been realized. These teachers' embrace of growth mindset in their everyday vocabulary is an example of how the concept of growth has permeated the staff culture.

Valuing growth as a measure of success. Nearly every teacher that I spoke with expressed a belief that growth was a sign of success—for them as professionals, and for their students. When asked what makes a teacher successful, one said “I think a successful teacher at [TLSD] is one who is open minded, seeking new strategies to improve teaching and learning, looking for opportunities to grow, and always looking for collaborative opportunities with teachers in the building and the community that we have. And valuing every kid individually.” One K-3 teacher equated her own success to her students' success, suggesting she is successful, “if our kids are engaged and that they're showing growth.”

The administration created systems to invite teachers into deep reflection on their practice. The IBs required a considerable amount of reflection. While the process was cumbersome, teachers insisted that it was the reflection piece that helped them grow professionally, and they valued this. One teacher summed up the process as follows:

But in its purest sense, you complete a rubric, you do reflections on a monthly basis, you grow. What's really cool about it, I feel like some of our evaluation standards are based to how well a kid grows. And that, that's part of the implementation bonus. But a lot of the reflections say, the reflection questions say, “how did you grow as a professional?” “How did your behavior alter the classroom?” “How did your expectations change?” “How did you change?” And then if I change, obviously the classroom is going to get better because I have grown as a professional.

Another teacher concurred,

I think the IB, it makes you reflect on your teaching and write it down. We talk a lot, but actually typing out exactly what progress and things that you're doing differently, writing it all down and actually seeing it that way is helpful and beneficial. It's helped us work with a wider range of people, because not just [my co-teacher] and I—because we work with...our intervention person, we work with our K-3 team, we work with a lot of different people, so obviously get a lot of different perspectives, helps grow.

When asked what makes a student successful, teachers generally responded that they wanted to see the students grow. The art teacher said that she tells her students, “I just want you to get above where you are, to improve in some way.” When asked specifically how she defined a successful student, the teacher added, “I think successful students grow some way, in everything they do.” Two of the K-3 teachers defined a successful student similarly, as “a student that's showing growth and making progress, who's determined to do better, putting forth their best effort with what they have” and as “a student who has made growth towards their goals.”

High school students confirmed the significance of growth in their experiences in the district, much of which they attributed to their work on service learning projects. One high school student shared,

I can tell you right now that I used to be super introverted, but this past year, doing all these service learning projects and even science fair and all that stuff, it's an insane amount of extra readiness now that I have—I wouldn't say I'm the biggest extrovert, but I definitely have become a lot more extroverted, and I feel more confident as a leader. I've done a lot more this year than I did last year, so I feel like that growth in the amount of stuff that I'm doing is really impacting how I grow.

Another high school student concurred,

I definitely have grown as well. I used to not be able to get in front of the class and even talk. Even in a group like this [the focus group], I'd be too afraid to do. So, I've grown a lot in that sense—being able to present, and when we did science fair there was a huge paper we had to write, and there was a lot of—you have to put all your effort into it and you have to work and you have to stay focused, so that helped me with being able to work harder and build my work ethic as well as being able to analyze and not get as stressed as I should have been, probably, at some points. And it helped me when I had to present my science fair in front of two judges that I didn't know, and the anxiety, and there's just a lot. But I've grown a lot, and I know that everything we've done has helped that so much.

By bringing in teachers who share the district's values, encouraging them to try engaging strategies, and supporting their growth, the district helped to cultivate a staff that was reflective and valued the growth of each individual student. In turn, teachers created opportunities that gave students “an insane amount of extra readiness” and opportunities to have “grown a lot” from their experiences.

Challenges with Organizational Changes

Staff turnover is a challenge in many rural schools, and TLSD is no exception. Having to contend with the changes to the district was a likely factor in many teachers' departure. Staff turnover was both a help and hindrance to the development of the district's culture. It was helpful in that the school had an opportunity to lose staff who were unable or unwilling to adjust their practices to align with the new directional system. It was a hindrance in that investments must continually be made to bring new people on board and to help them catch up with the district's vision and ways of doing thing. As one teacher noted,

There's really only a handful of us that have been here for a long time, and not too many that have even been here for a few years. And I think they're making the transition and wanting to be more project-based, more service learning. Some people just said, "I'm out," and went their own way. I think we got some good—I think they've been more selective about bringing people in who think the same way and are interested in pursuing the same goals.

Although the superintendent believed that the IB has been intriguing for new staff, it posed challenges for existing teachers. Several teachers cited the reflection required for the IB as beneficial, but the amount of time required was overwhelming for some. One teacher shared how the constant pressure of complying with the IB could be both rewarding and stressful. She stated,

It's always like, "Oh, my gosh. It's the end of the month. I have to do the reflection" [exhales]... When I'm getting the end of the month, it's like an, "Ugh, do I really want to do this?" But I've found that as I write those reflections, other things come to me and I make revelations sometimes, or at least minor revelations.

The IB also incentivized teachers away from strategies that are valuable to them. Two K-3 teachers had the following exchange:

Teacher 1: But the area I want to work on is the service learning, and I want the freedom to experiment with that.

Teacher 2: Right, and not with a rubric. That's the problem. It's like, "Woah, that rubric's too hard. I'm not doing it. I will not do it. I won't do it," you know what I mean?

Teacher 1: It's overwhelming, yeah.

Teacher 2: I don't want to feel that way—"Because I'm not going to succeed according, maybe, to this rubric. I'm just not going to try." That's a hard thing. You don't want to just go for something that, "I already am strong at that. Okay, I'll just do differentiation because then I'll get the money," you know? I don't—you want to grow yourself.

As mentioned earlier, teachers admitted that they avoided pursuing the IB in the more difficult strategies, such as the one for technology integration which one teacher described as a “bear.”

The superintendent acknowledged that “some people don’t like the amount of work in [the IB],” and some people simply had other constraints on their time. The superintendent was aware that the teachers were constricted. She lamented, “we’ve managed to carve out time for them but there’s just never enough time for teachers to dig down and get to what they need.”

In spite of the problems, roughly half of the teachers continued to step up to the challenge of participating in the IB each semester. The district’s commitment to hiring staff who aligned with the new directional system helped to shift the staff culture. Beliefs about growth mindset and valuing service were also important inputs that continued to shape the staff culture.

Discussion

Owens and Valesky’s (2015) school climate model illustrates the interaction among four interrelated dimensions: ecology, organization, staff culture, and student milieu. This paper focused on how organizational changes—specifically the new directional system--affected staff culture in TLSD. Through observations, interviews, and a review of documents, I determined that the new directional system led to cultural changes among the staff that also had a positive impact on students. Specifically, the directional system informed the district’s hiring practices, incentivized the exploration of new teaching strategies, and inspired teachers to adopt a growth mindset. In short, it changed who was in the building, what they taught, and how they assessed—themselves and their students.

Some of the participants noted that the hiring practices had the biggest influence on the

culture shift. After losing a significant number of teachers at the high school level, the district was able to hire new teachers whose beliefs, values, and teaching practices aligned with the district's directional system. High school students, who had been with the district the longest, identified how this shift led to more caring teachers.

The directional system also incentivized the exploration of new teaching strategies. The directional system prioritized service learning, project-based learning, co-teaching, differentiation, subject integration, and technology integration. From the start of the IB through the fall of 2018, differentiation was the most popular strategy, followed by co-teaching, and then service learning. Co-teaching was initially popular, but only a few teachers continued to work on it after that first semester. Co-teaching benefits students but requires considerable planning time in order to be effective (Scruggs, et al., 2007). Although differentiation was not addressed in great detail in interviews, the teachers who co-taught demonstrated evidence of differentiation in how they managed different groups of students. Service learning was the strategy most frequently discussed and was one that teachers were committed to even without the incentive from the IB. Some teachers felt that the IB actually incentivized them away from service learning, the strategy that they wanted to focus on more. Yet when their peers shared what they learned from working on the IB, teachers were inspired to pursue their own professional development and try new things.

Finally, the new directional system inspired staff to prioritize growth—their professional growth and their students' growth. This focus on growth seemed to be the culmination of the administration allowing for the freedom to try new things and learn from successes and failures, as well as the teachers deciding to study the concept of growth mindset after an IB showcase on the topic. Teachers had conversations with their students about their academic performance in terms of growth. Teachers stated that students began to modify their language, and instead of saying “can't” they have learned to say, “I will try, I will do my best.” Likewise, teachers have modified their language with each other. When discussing the garage door on her classroom, one teacher modified her language from “I don't need the open and close” to “We haven't found, yet, a way that that is needed.” High school students even discussed how much they had grown as a result of service learning projects. Bolman and Deal (2008) explain that “a specialized language both reflects and shapes a group's culture” (p. 284). The use of the term growth by so many participants—administration, teachers, and students—was evidence of how widespread the concept had been incorporated in the district.

These innovations were not without challenges, however. Like many rural districts, TLSD had a high rate of turnover. Given the challenges that rural schools have with recruiting and retaining teachers (Gagnon, 2016; Sher, 2018), TLSD demonstrated courage and conviction by implementing innovative standards for employment. Although getting hired in TLSD may be harder than getting hired in other districts, what TLSD offered may serve to mitigate their retention challenges. Some research suggests that TLSD's practices are associated with teacher retention in rural districts. For instance, one study found that for rural teachers, the key to retention lies in relationships, specifically their commitment to students; opportunities for leadership and collaboration; connections to community; and personal and professional ties (Seelig & McCabe, 2021). For some teachers, living in a tightly-knit community can even outweigh the higher salaries that another district may offer (Gallo, 2020). By cultivating a stronger staff culture, TLSD is helping to bridge connections that may keep teachers in the district longer.

Financial incentives can help to retain teachers in rural schools, although they are not likely to be sufficient. Gagnon (2016) notes that many states that offer financial incentives to teachers couple these with other strategies. Although the superintendent believed that the IB helped to raise

interest in the district, it was too soon to determine whether or not the IB was an effective recruitment tool. Moreover, the stress associated with completing the IB could, for some teachers, outweigh the benefit. Some of the TLSD teachers cared more about continuing with the district strategies than pursuing the IB. Professional growth was also somewhat in conflict with the IB. Two teachers discussed wanting to grow themselves with the IB, but not wanting to risk losing the financial incentive by choosing a more challenging strategy.

What gets taught in rural schools is another factor contributing to teacher retention. Seelig and McCabe (2021) found that "a collaborative culture, exemplified by professional opportunities to connect with other teachers to align curriculum or address student needs, appeared to be key to teacher satisfaction and retention" (p. 12). They also note the value of "pedagogical flexibility and autonomy" (p. 8) that allowed teachers in their study to focus on their students' needs instead of overly focus on external academic standards. TLSD's commitment to center students' growth over meeting arbitrary standards gave teachers the freedom to experiment with new instructional strategies that served the needs of their students, and allowed teachers to retain a level of professionalism and agency that current reform efforts are undermining elsewhere.

Alongside the ecological changes in the district, these organizational changes helped to cultivate a more caring and supportive environment for students that assessed students in terms of growth and service. Despite stereotypes of rural districts being "effortlessly close-knit" (Gallo, 2020), participants were clear that the changes in the district led to the cultural shift and enhanced ethic of community care. Scholars have identified caring relationships and high levels of social trust as critical to students' academic success in schools (Noddings, 2013; Payne, 2013). In fact, Noddings (2013) insists that "the primary aim of every educational institution and of every educational effort must be the maintenance and enhancement of caring" (p. 182). Noddings does not attempt to dismiss the importance of academics, but instead insists that the pursuit of academics should not be at the expense of an ethic of care. Service learning helps to promulgate the ethic of care throughout the district. Research shows that students who participate in service learning experience increased self-esteem and self-concept, and highly internalized moral standards. They also have positive attitudes toward school and learning, higher levels of civic engagement, social skills, and academic achievement (Celio, et al., 2011). TLSD students expressed similar outcomes. As one high school student noted, "doing all these service-learning projects and even science fair...it's an insane amount of extra readiness now that I have...and I feel more confident as a leader."

In order for these reforms to be sustainable for TLSD and other districts like it, policy needs to support the recruitment and retention of teachers to rural schools. No Child Left Behind (NCLB) created significant barriers to teacher recruitment but the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) provides more flexibility. Flexibility with teacher preparation pathways, strengthening partnerships between districts and universities, placing student teachers in rural districts, and including coursework on rurality are all ways to boost the available pool of teachers for rural districts (Gagnon, 2016). State leaders also need to allow flexibility with teaching and assessment without abandoning criteria for equity and accountability. ESSA permitted a handful of states to explore "innovative approaches" to assessment such as performance-based assessments (Every Student Succeeds Act, n.d.). Performance-based assessments align well with service learning projects and enable students from diverse backgrounds an opportunity to demonstrate what they know and can do. These approaches require more resources than standardized assessments, and therefore need the support of policymakers in order to implement with fidelity as an alternative accountability measure.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

The use of Owens and Valesky's school climate model illuminated possible interactions between different aspects of the district's changes. At the same time, models for organizational change necessarily limit data analysis, and therefore limited the ability to address all of the possible changes in the district (Chance & Segura, 2009). There is space for additional research on the implementation bonus in the district and its effects on teacher recruitment, retention, and student performance. Some research suggests that highly effective teachers are no more likely to choose performance based incentives than other teachers, although performance based pay could attract more risk-loving teachers to the profession (Bowen & Mills, 2017). Collecting data on why teachers chose to work at TLSD and why some left would prove helpful over time to see if the IB is having an impact on recruitment and retention. Collaborative planning time was an important organizational change that facilitated staff working together, but in and of itself was not identified as shifting the staff culture. Rather, the collaboration that resulted from being together in the new building was identified as contributing to cultural changes. Thus, I included collaborative planning time as an example of district supports, but not as a driver of cultural change. Finally, further studies that examine how students in classes that are employing district strategies compare to those using traditional pedagogical approaches might prove beneficial, although the small size of the district will make this challenging, and perhaps impossible to do in secondary level classes that have only one teacher per subject area.

Conclusion

Superintendents everywhere (often unknowingly) straddle two cultures: an abstract professional culture dominated by fads, and an on-the-ground local culture centered on every day, real life. Rural superintendents are more likely than superintendents in large districts to experience the on-the-ground culture more intensely (Howley et al., 2014). Importantly, rural superintendents sometimes resist their state government's agendas. Howley et al. (2014) argue,

Teachers and communities need the influence of superintendents with a broader outlook in order to undertake curriculum work that addresses their communities' rural identities, rural commitments, and rural fates. Reclaiming local schools on behalf of communities would seemingly be a more appropriate response than adopting yet another imported fad, especially, we think, in communities where educators are demoralized, the community is excluded from the school through numerous "professional" barricades, and the work of cultivating young minds has been virtually abandoned. (p. 625)

TLSD's superintendent expressed gratitude that its board was supportive of their initiatives, believing the standardized assessments were not as important as the sense of efficacy that students would carry with them after leaving school. Those who insist that the only way innovation can flourish is through neoliberal policy reforms or in nontraditional (e.g., charter) schools are simply touting a false message. Innovation can flourish in traditional public schools if policymakers would simply let public schools be innovative. Education policy "yearns for intelligibility, predictability and certainty" which necessitates the elimination of "complexity, contingency and contestability" (Clarke, 2018, p. 6). It is policymakers' insistence on control through standardiza-

tion, assessments, and numerical evidence that squelches any possibility for innovation. The district in this study took a completely different approach. Instead of an increase of control, the administration opted for shared leadership. Instead of standardization, they opted for student-centeredness. Assessments and numerical evidence still mattered, but those factors were not more important than watching students grow, show initiative, serve their community, and find their purpose. Under the leadership of the district's superintendent, the district transformed into a model of what is possible when a community takes a chance on something innovative.

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