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Rural Education Revitalized: Investigating And Resolving Specific Challenges In Rural Schools

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RURAL EDUCATION REVITALIZED: INVESTIGATING AND RESOLVING SPECIFIC
CHALLENGES IN RURAL SCHOOLS

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Dedication

To the pursuit of knowledge and the fight for the liberation of everyone, everywhere. And to everyone actively combating the inherently violent and exploitative systems that plague our society and its institutions, under which we all suffer. May we collectively create a more harmonious future for ourselves, in memory of those that came before us, and for the well-being of those that will come next.

RURAL EDUCATION REVITALIZED: INVESTIGATING AND RESOLVING SPECIFIC
CHALLENGES IN RURAL SCHOOLS

by

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THESIS

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I would like to express my eternal gratitude towards all the educators that have contributed to my academic and personal growth throughout the years. I am profoundly grateful to all who have shared their knowledge and their passion for education with me. Moreover, I want to extend my heartfelt thanks to everyone in my life who, in their own unique ways, has helped to shape who I am today. Beyond formal education, we are all perpetual students and teachers in this life. We are all interconnected, humans experiencing life together, continuously learning from and teaching one another. Our shared experiences and interactions form the essence of humanity and contribute to the exchange of vital wisdom that leads to deep understanding.

Abstract

This thesis paper investigates the multifaceted challenges and the potential solutions to the issues afflicting rural education. Despite being often marginalized in educational policy discussions, rural schools confront a plethora of unique issues that significantly impact the educational experiences of students and the overall well-being of their communities. This paper explores the elusive concept of “rurality”, emphasizing that rural communities are diverse and dynamic, shaped by different historical, cultural, and socioeconomic factors.

The review of the literature includes a historical analysis tracing the evolution of rural education, highlighting key turning points, legislation, and social forces that have contributed to rural education’s contemporary condition. By examining the intersectional nature of rurality with other identities, the paper reveals the complexity of the challenges faced by rural schools, which include resource accessibility, instructional quality, socioeconomic inequality, and policy decisions. Central to this inquiry is the role of community and the impact of educational policy on rural schools. The literature reveals the critical importance of community involvement and the influence that the implementation of informed pedagogical and policy approaches can have on rural communities.

The findings underscore the necessity of collaboration among educators, policymakers, community members, and stakeholders to implement effective changes. Through a comprehensive assessment of existing literature, this thesis paper proposes strategies for addressing these challenges, advocating for educational equity and the empowerment of rural communities. By prioritizing educational equity and fostering community empowerment, rural communities can thrive through the transformative power of education, regardless of geographic location.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Rural education is often overlooked in discussions of educational policy and reform (Johnson et al., 2021), relegated to the peripheries of educational focus. The concept of “rurality” itself is elusive, resisting clear definition. Despite the classist misconception that rural Americans are ignorant, and beneath the fantasized tranquil facade, lies a complexity that does defy any easy definition. Rural communities are not homogeneous entities (Tieken & Montgomery, 2021). In fact, they are diverse, vibrant, and possess distinct strengths and needs that are often demonized or intentionally ignored. Rural education’s specific issues have significantly shaped the educational experiences of rural students and, consequently, the well-being of their communities (Crumb et al., 2022).

Crumb et al. (2023) suggest that there are about 70 different definitions of rurality being used by numerous United States federal agencies. Tieken and Montgomery (2021) assert that there are more than 15 definitions of rurality being used by the federal government, on top of the fact that states have definitions of their own. They explain that most definitions indicate that about 20% of Americans are considered rural, but that the figures can be drastically different, from 17% to 49% of people being considered rural residents, depending on the applied definition. They also note that the demographics of rural places are changing as they become more diverse. Between 2000 and 2010, the number of nonwhite individuals living in rural areas increased from 8.6 million to 10.3 million, representing a growth rate of 19.8%. In contrast, the rural white population underwent no considerable change during this period.

The lack of consistency leads to rural education related statistics becoming convoluted at times due to the lack of definitional clarity. For example, Schafft (2016) states that there are approximately 12.4 million children in America that attend public schools in rural places, which

would include about a quarter of all American students, and about one-third of all public American schools, whereas Hartman et al. (2022) and Crumb et al. (2023) both report several years later that approximately 9.3 million rural students are being served in America. This research implies that the population size is decreasing (unless the school-age demographic is drastically changing), while the research conducted by Tieken and Montgomery (2021) shows that it is increasing. It is possible that, in fact, the different definitions being used led to researchers overlooking certain changes in the population because who is considered a part of that population is unclear. It becomes even harder to discern population trends because some rural industries are growing while others are in decline. Obviously, there is a major need for increased attention and further research in this area.

In this paper, I investigate and critically examine the multifaceted nature of the current problems faced in rural schools. I do so by exploring the concept of rurality and the implications of an ostensibly inadequate understanding of rural communities as marginalized groups with distinct needs. Central to this inquiry is the recognition that rural communities are not simply geographical locations, but rather dynamic social constructs shaped by historical, cultural, and socioeconomic factors. I aim to do this by understanding the context of its history and exploring the intersectional nature of rurality with other identities, thus creating multidimensional struggles. I will follow this discussion by exploring the ramifications this problem has on contemporary rural education as well as investigating ways to resolve its issues based on existing research.

This paper includes a brief historical investigation that aims to follow the evolution of rural education from its inception to the present, emphasizing key turning points, laws, and social forces that have influenced rural education's terrain. This will provide key insight into the ongoing struggles that rural communities confront and the systemic reasons that have led to their

marginalization. This marginalization manifests as hardships felt by rural communities, including resource accessibility, instructional quality, socioeconomic inequality, and the effects of urban-normative policymaking. This assessment of the literature will not only identify issues but also look at viable solutions and tactics that may be used to meet the particular requirements of rural education and the ways this may manifest differently in different rural areas, since rural communities do not exist as a monolith.

1.1 Outline of the Chapters

In the following chapter, I address the methodology used to conduct the narrative literature review. In the findings chapter, I first contextualize the topic by exploring its history and addressing its specific challenges and needs. Then, I discuss the importance that community plays in rural education and the impacts that educational policy has on rural communities. Finally, I bring to attention the effects of informed pedagogical and policy approaches on rural communities and their schools. In the discussion chapter, I address the limitations, implications, and future research needed.

Chapter 2: Methodology

This narrative literature review was conducted to summarize and synthesize the research and information pertaining to the challenges faced by rural schools and the efficiency and efficacy of the existing approaches aimed at mitigating these issues. The limited existing research is reviewed, critiqued, and synthesized to best understand the area of focus. To find literature relevant to the topic, I searched multiple databases for peer-reviewed articles and scholarly books using specific search terms. Using Google Scholar and the Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC) database, I searched for the following terms to procure relevant literature:

1. Freirean Ideology Or Critical Pedagogy Or Critical Consciousness AND Rural Education
2. Rural School Or Rural Education AND Challenges Or Issues
3. Rural School Or Rural Education AND History
4. Rural Lens AND Educational Policy
5. Urban-Centric Educational Policy Or Rural Place-Based Educational Policy

The majority of the 26 included peer-reviewed sources have been published within the last ten years, with the exception of three older articles: Miller (1995), Barley and Beesley (2007), and Howley (2004). These articles were included to provide both context and content, as this is a mature topic despite relatively minimal research being done in this area. Due to the nature of the topic, a significant amount of the literature was sourced from one particular journal, *The Rural Educator*, because it is one of the few journals in existence that focuses on the desperately under-researched topic of rural education.

Freirean Ideology was chosen as a search term specifically because of the contributions Paulo Freire, a Brazilian educator and philosopher, made to critical pedagogy. Freire had a

personal understanding of problems associated with rural populations and worked with literacy programs in rural areas (Budnyk et al., 2023). I felt that because of his experience with rural education, his educational theories are particularly applicable to this topic. While I was inspired by the work of Freire, my research was not limited by his work, as the included articles explore several different ideologies. To further contextualize my approach to this research, it is important to consider my own positionality.

2.1 Positionality

My personal experience teaching kindergarten through second grade in both high-needs urban and high-needs rural environments in Florida has demonstrated a need for specific consideration of rurality as a form of marginalization. While completing my teacher preparation program, I was simultaneously involved in two internships. One internship involved practicing classroom techniques in a high-needs rural school. At the same time, I participated in an internship as an elementary-aged care provider for children in a homeless shelter that was located in an urban environment.

These two experiences juxtaposed against one another demonstrated similarities as well as differences and sparked my interest in understanding how geopolitics can impact education. After graduating, I taught for three years in a high-needs urban environment, followed by another year of teaching in a high-needs rural school. This firsthand experience teaching in rural communities has cultivated an interest and desire to understand the specific conditions found in rural schools. Seeing the disparities that exist in rural education and becoming aware of the lack of research existing on this topic has inspired aspirations of contributing to the overall understanding of ways to best serve rural communities in their development through self-determination.

My position and interpretation of information have also been largely inspired by my fascination with revolutionary educators such as Paulo Freire and bell hooks. The ideas I learned from the liberation-centered works of these great educators profoundly influenced my personal ideology, which informed my every thought as I chose my topic, read the literature, and analyzed the sources. Thus, I approach this topic from a position of love. The concept of revolutionary love, the idea that love is a commitment to others that leads to liberation (Freire, 1970), and that love is

inherently political and has the propensity to conjure the deepest revolutions through community and self-care (hooks, 1999), has shaped my understanding and approach to educational practices, social justice, and life in general.

2.2 Data Analysis

After the literature was selected, it was analyzed to identify common themes. The analysis consisted of revisiting the annotations of the literature and coding for common topics to then synthesize the literature. Through analysis and interpretation, recurring themes and patterns were identified to organize the complex literature into sections, including historical legacies, unique challenges and needs, the importance of community and policy frameworks, as well as pedagogical and policy approaches that can be used to shape the educational experiences of rural learners. Codes of recurring topics in the selected literature included challenges, needs, defining rurality, history, community, urban-normativity/ urban-centric ideology, policy, and pedagogy. After analysis, three common themes relating to the thesis became apparent, including;

1. Specific History, Challenges, and Needs of Rural Schools
2. The Importance of Community and Educational Policy in Rural Schools
3. Suggested Informed Pedagogical and Policy Approaches for Rural Schools

These three themes will be further explained in the following section, as they will be used to inform the development of the paper and serve as the focus for the body of the narrative literature review.

Chapter 3: Findings

This section is the culmination of the findings from the conducted narrative literature review. The findings include scholarly works that shed light on the challenges, needs, and potential solutions within the realm of rural education. The findings delve into the nuanced topic of rural schools and bring to light the intricacy of influencing factors that lead to the realities currently present in rural communities. The findings demonstrate the multifaceted nature of rural education and point towards informed pathways for fostering equity, resilience, and empowerment within rural educational contexts.

3.1 Specific History, Challenges, & Needs of Rural Schools

Understanding the multifaceted challenges and unique needs in rural schools and their communities is essential to implementing effective, best-practice approaches that can be used to address and alleviate the inequalities found in rural schools compared to their nonrural counterparts. Acknowledging the historical context that caused current conditions to come to fruition is an imperative aspect of informed decision-making. Historically, poor policymaking has exacerbated the inherent issues associated with some of the more challenging characteristics attributed to rural schools. Due to the isolated nature of schools qualifying for the rural demographic, challenges include but are not limited to underfunding, understaffing, urban-centric policymaking, and a general lack of resources (Biddle & Azano, 2016). These challenges manifest differently in different communities, as rural America is extremely diverse and by no means a monolith.

3.1.1 History

Historically, the very definition of rurality itself has posed its own challenges, as there is no universally accepted definition. Biddle and Azano (2016) illustrate this problem as they discuss the fact that the understanding of rurality is convoluted as the definition of rurality has changed over time and warn against the conflation of rurality with anti-modernity. Essentially, the assumption that rurality is synonymous with anti-modernity misconstrues the reality of modern rural communities, inaccurately portrays rurality as diametrically opposed to modernization, and oversimplifies the complex ways that rural communities engage with and contribute to modern society.

While Biddle and Azano's (2016) article does consist of a secondary source because the authors are conducting a review of historical literature, I have included it for valid reasons. Namely, this topic has very limited research. Additionally, this research article specifically investigates the evolution of rural education over the last 100 years, contextualizing the topic and providing necessary historical relevance and context. They conducted this invaluable research by implementing a theoretical lens, using symbolic interactionism¹ and transactional theory, to consider different conceptions of rurality. The overarching claim presented in the article asserts that perceptions of the challenges faced by rural schools and communities have evolved due to changing social, economic, and educational contexts over time. The changing contexts have been constructed and reconstructed throughout history as researchers, policymakers, and educators grapple with understanding and addressing the unique needs and disparities present in rural education.

¹ Symbolic interactionism allowed the authors to explore the influence of social interaction on the subjective meanings ascribed to abstract ideas, while transactional theory was used to understand changes in rural education discourse over time (Biddle & Azano, 2016).

The findings from Biddle and Azano's (2016) study demonstrate a fluctuation in the prominence of rural-focused educational research in America, as well as an overview of the ways that new economic opportunities and technology changed rural life, including education, leading to both new opportunities as well as new challenges. The findings begin with a focus on the early 1900s, when the "rural problem" was first posed by urban education reformists. The conception of the "rural problem" illustrates the way that early education reformers framed rurality itself as an inherent problem. Despite this, the early 20th century, and the increasing globalization and industrialization that came with it, was a time of major change for rural communities. The creation of the Country Life Commission in 1909 demonstrated increased attention to rurality, and departments were made specifically to address the unique needs of rural schools.

In the following decades, Biddle and Azano (2016) noted that attention to rurality was maintained, yet the issues of isolation, limited resources, and limited funding are all persistent contemporary issues. However, the literature often operates under the assumption that rural schools are monolithic in nature, meaning they view rural schools as unvarying and generally indistinguishable from one another, which limits the efficacy of the research at that time. By the 1950s, most one-room schoolhouses were consolidated, and a decline in interest in rural schools was evident as attention focused on World War II efforts. After this, the focus was revitalized briefly. A new, more intersectional lens² was applied to the integration efforts that forced reformers to consider aspects of racial equity that had been previously overlooked. Unfortunately, attention once again diminished as urban reformers felt that their efforts were sufficient, despite persisting issues.

² Intersectionality refers to the idea that multiple identities intersect and interact with one another, creating unique experiences of oppression, discrimination, or privilege (Crenshaw, 1989). Furthermore, an intersectional lens should be applied to identify the way these overlapping identities are influenced by structural and institutional systems of power, which compound on one another, perpetuating social inequalities.

In the 1980s, rural education literature reflected optimistic sentiments, and some exclusively rural education-focused scholarly journals were created, including *The Rural Educator*, which was used to find sources for this paper (Biddle & Azano, 2016). By the 1990s and early 2000s, many of the same issues documented in rural education research in the early 1900s remained relevant, and neoliberal policies emphasized fiscal and performance-based accountability. Neoliberal policies refer to policy decisions based on the belief in free-market capitalism, privatization, and reduced public expenditure on social services, with a focus on market-driven approaches and efficiency. However, it was during this time that rural researchers began to perceive an increase in the importance of differentiating rural contexts from urban and suburban contexts for schooling and policymaking. Literature began to point out the cultural deficit model of previous literature, which focused only on rural communities' problems and ignored their opportunities. The shift away from deficit perspectives toward place-based practices, pedagogical approaches that take into consideration the location in which they are being implemented, offers a promising future for rural education research. In this same manner, an innovative approach to the uniqueness of the rural learning context and the ways it can be leveraged to increase curricular relevance also provides a more robust perspective on rural revitalization. This is a topic that will be further explored in a later section.

After conducting their research, Biddle and Azano (2016) found that the education field needs to reimagine its approach to educating marginalized places in a more holistic and inclusive fashion. Educators should be mindful of localized complexities by celebrating their strengths without reproducing their constraints. In contrast to the deficit lens applied by rural researchers of the past, current research shows that modern rural advocates emphasize the need for policies to consider community characteristics and student needs to address inequities, highlighting the critical role of

rural schools despite challenges in funding, staffing, academic achievement variation, brain-drain (the emigration of highly educated or trained people from a particular area), and unfair allocation of Title 1 funds (money allocated to low socioeconomic schools), with federal initiatives like the Rural and Low-Income School Program and neoliberal policies exacerbating disadvantages. It is important to acknowledge that these issues are a manifestation of institutional oppression, not an inherent deficit or flaw with rurality or rural people. Researchers must be able to move past defining the “rural problem” and into implementing pedagogical approaches that will provide new opportunities for rural students in the time of global capitalism.

Three decades prior, Miller (1995) wrote a digest using qualitative research to explain the relationship between rural schools and their communities. Miller argued that rural schools play a pivotal role in their communities; in addition to the educational services, they serve as cultural centers for the community. The digest identified three approaches researchers identified for building and strengthening school and community relationships: 1. The school as a community center. 2. The community as curriculum. 3. School-based enterprise programs focused on preparing students with useful skills that can translate into future economic drivers of their communities. These approaches emphasized ways to capitalize on the existence of the rural school, to extend its use as a community center in addition to a place of education, to include the needs of the community in terms of development involvement as areas of study, and to prepare students to enter the workforce post-graduation. Contemporary rural education researchers, including Biddle and Azano (2016), Tieken (2017), and Schafft (2016), question this sentiment, which initially appears positive, as it aligns with neoliberal beliefs.

Addressing relevant historical influences not discussed in depth by Biddle and Azano (2016), Miller (1995) explained that the economic downturn of the 1980s and the trend of

globalization in the 1990s affected rural communities. During this time, businesses shut down, many young and educated individuals moved to urban areas, and social services, including schools, were regionalized or consolidated to reduce costs. To revitalize these communities, Miller suggested that educational and community development should mutually benefit one another by serving the students and the community as a whole. Miller believes that each of the three approaches he included will work to strengthen the school/community bond, demonstrating important aspects of improving the lives of rural Americans through education and developing purposeful solidarity by valuing culture, beliefs, and values that motivate community unification.

During this time, the research from Miller's (1995) three approaches showed that the school can play a vital role and serve as a vital multipurpose resource in community development. It is important to develop a durable foundation for a school-community relationship that will last, provide quality learning experiences, and make a positive impact on the entire community. This is accomplished through curriculum choices, pedagogical approaches, policy changes, and community partnerships to increase community viability. In doing this, students are building up their social capital while the communities and their members are having their immediate material needs met.

Miller contended that policy changes would be an inevitable part of creating change in rural communities. Brenner (2016) explored the history of particular policy decisions that were made, and the efficacy of the observable change they had on rural schools. Brenner investigated the effects felt after the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965, was replaced by the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), which was enacted in 2002 along with the first rendition of the Rural Education Achievement Program (REAP). Brenner also explored the 2015 Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) as well as the accompanying updated version of REAP. The NCLB

Act was a significant overhaul of the ESEA Act in that it aimed at increasing accountability in education. NCLB required annual testing and set performance benchmarks known as Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) for schools.

While the policy claims to focus on improving all schools with a focus on schools with large low-income populations, NCLB has been criticized for its one-size-fits-all approach to policy (Biddle & Schafft, 2014). This approach is especially detrimental to rural schools, as the AYP requirements do not take into consideration the unique challenges faced by rural schools (Biddle & Schafft, 2014). One reason that small rural schools were disproportionately affected by stringent AYP requirements is the fact that the performance of a few students has a higher impact on overall scores due to small population numbers. Additionally, the mandate for highly qualified teachers in every subject posed unique challenges in rural schools that struggled to manage with limited staff and resources (Biddle & Schafft, 2014).

Brenner (2016) noted that in response to these shortcomings, the Rural Education Achievement Program (REAP) was introduced under NCLB. REAP claimed to recognize the distinct challenges faced by rural schools, aiming to provide more equitable resources. This program is comprised of two main programs: Small Rural School Achievement (SRSA), which targets small rural schools in sparsely populated areas, as well as Rural and Low-Income Schools (RLIS), which provides formula grants to states to be distributed to rural Local Educational Agencies (LEAs). Rural LEAs are known to receive fewer Title 1 funds. The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) was signed into law in 2015 and has been in effect since 2016, replacing NCLB in hopes of rectifying some of its faults. ESSA maintained the focus on accountability and testing but attempted to give states some more control and flexibility in the implementation of educational policies. Under ESSA, the federal AYP requirements were abolished, allowing states

to develop their own methods for identifying and supporting their low-performing schools. ESSA also removed federal definitions of what constitutes a highly qualified teacher by allowing states to set their own criteria for this title. Under ESSA, REAP also saw some updates to the policy. Changes included the adoption of urban-centric locale codes in determining rural eligibility, meaning that eligibility is based on proximity to an urban area, a practice that is reductive to the unique needs and characteristics of diverse rural communities. Additionally, under ESSA, there was greater flexibility in the way REAP funds were allocated to districts for both SRSA as well as RLIS, and there were several more competitive grant programs introduced that provided additional funds for LEAs to distribute.

Unfortunately, despite the progression of ESEA from NCLB to ESSA, the advancements that have been made with that transition, and the improvements made to REAP, Brenner (2016) explains that these policies still miss the mark in fully addressing the unique needs of many rural schools and communities. ESSA and its subsequent reform policies have attempted to accommodate rural schools, yet oversights continue to be an issue when attempting to write and implement rural educational policy.

Although issues relating to rural education have been persistent, and research on these issues remains limited, the understandings and approaches to the issues have evolved, just as the issues themselves have evolved over time. Tieken's (2017) article consists of a theoretical exploration that explores the spatialization of racial inequity in rural and urban America. Spatialization is a form of marginalization that poses a challenge to rural schools and is best described as the ways in which the physical or geographic factors of a location can contribute to the marginalization or exclusion of their communities. Spatialization can negatively affect communities in terms of their distribution of resources, infrastructure, and opportunities. Like

other forms of marginalization, spatialization systematically affects particularly disadvantaged populations based on their location or proximity to, in this case, non-rural spaces. Disproportionate attention is paid to the perceived norm, urban environments emphasize the needs of urban populations while overlooking the needs of rural populations, which is especially detrimental to populations that struggle with access to the resources provided in urban environments. Similar to the previously cited research, this article also reconfirms the issue of taxonomy, asserting that there are many definitions attributed to rurality and that classification systems of rurality remain unclear.

Through the lens of critical race theory, Tieken (2017) asserts that educational inequity is spatialized in addition to being tied to race and class struggles. Critical race theory examines how race intersects with systems of power, privilege, and oppression, as well as other social identities such as gender, class, sexuality, ability, geographic location, etc. The focus of this source is on the connections between the spatialization-related disadvantages of both urban and rural communities. The author uses critical race theory to reframe the history of American schooling through history while focusing on race, class, and geography.

This article was placed in this section because it explores how spatialization occurred as a result of systemic educational decisions that were made over time. For example, the article discussed the unequal systems of education that emerged in both rural and urban schools throughout the 1800s and 1900s. Countering the perspective of Miller (1995), Tieken (2017) suggested that the systematic marginalization of both poor urban and rural children was done intentionally, using geopolitics to oppress particular regions in order for those with political and economic power to maintain their advantage. This belief can be tied back to many instances in history. For example, modern public schools have ties to the common schools in the 1800s, and the educational policies reflect the larger systems of economic and political racial exploitation of

the time.

Similarly to Biddle and Azano (2016), Tieken (2017) speculated that when the shift from agrarianism to industrialization occurred, the “rural school problem” was born, as many people left their rural homes to look for factory jobs. Immigrants were moving to the rural areas, and rural schools were closing down and being consolidated. Civil rights victories changed the demographics of both urban and rural schools, although many attempts at desegregation were resisted. Interestingly, while public rural schools tend to be Whiter overall, they have less segregation due to the fact that there are fewer schools in those areas, creating more diverse student bodies (Tieken, 2017). In both rural and urban localities, there exist wealthier, Whiter schools that continue to struggle to, or intentionally refuse to, desegregate.

Geography, it seems, was a determining factor in the inequitable distribution of resources to different schools over time. Tieken (2017) described this phenomenon of spatialization and the way it is produced and reproduced through the exploitation of space. With the systemic practice of spatialization comes its justifications; both terms “urban” and “rural” carry negative connotations, and these spaces are of diminished value. Despite the fact that in the history of educational research, urban and rural places are often posed as contrasting negative stereotypes, this scholar stated that urban and rural schools should not be seen as opposing entities battling for attention and resources but as allies pursuing equity for all students regardless of their location from a united front. Positioning this issue outside of the urban/rural binary eliminates a hindering factor of competition and replaces it with an alternative perspective focused on solidarity across geography.

In sum, the scholars presented so far have contextualized the issues found in rural educational settings by exploring relevant historical information on the topic through several

different theoretical approaches, from a deficit lens to a more critical perspective, as well as presenting policy decisions such as ESSA, NCLB, and REAP, that have been made over the years that led to current conditions. Not only do these sources provide information about the history of rural education over time, but the sources themselves demonstrate how rural educational research has changed over time as well.

3.1.2 Challenges and Needs

While unveiling the intricacies of rural history, the multifaceted challenges and needs faced by rural communities subsequently become uncovered. Due to the decisions made over time and the institutional oppression imposed on rural communities, the current challenges and needs that present themselves have materialized. While it would be impossible to discuss every nuanced issue observable in rural schools today, I have identified numerous areas of concern, including fundamental misunderstandings of rurality itself, unfair funding, difficulty accessing necessary resources, issues with staffing, academic achievement variation, and the negative effects of neoliberal policy decisions.

Tieken and Montgomery (2021) explore some of these challenges as they delve into the complexities associated with defining rurality, as well as the characteristics of rural schools and the disparities they face, including the lack of consensus on a single agreed-upon definition of rurality. Additionally, they touch on the issues that arise due to the misconceptions and stereotypes pertaining to rural communities, including the notion that rural communities are less diverse than they are in reality.

They warn of fictitious depictions of rurality, including the “backwoods and backward” (the belief that rural communities have nothing to offer “modern society” and that rural people are one-dimensional or lacking intelligence), as well as the overly romanticized and “nostalgic” rose-tinted ruralism (the idealized notion that rural communities are without fault, or the final location of a “lost” idealistic America that never existed), that disregard and fail to acknowledge the reality of rurality in any meaningful capacity (Tieken & Montgomery, 2021, p. 7). Both false conceptions hinder progress because they obscure both the strengths and the challenges in these communities.

Tieken and Montgomery (2021) provided an overview of these strengths and challenges in American rural schools through qualitative research by providing anecdotal stories about students in particular rural schools and information collected firsthand during fieldwork. According to their findings, rural American students encounter a multitude of unique challenges that hinder educational equity and opportunity. These factors include limited resources, limited funding, teacher recruitment and retention issues, access to quality curriculum, transportation challenges, the digital divide, declining enrollment, and healthcare access. The authors mention that the already struggling rural schools were met with an even heavier burden during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, which was responsible for exacerbating many forms of systemic injustice across the globe.

Funding, they suggest, is perhaps the biggest inequity, with many rural districts being severely underfunded. Funding in places with high property values generates their funding locally; places without this means of funding must find themselves at a disadvantage given the lower total local property tax revenue and, therefore, rely on additional funding from the state and federal government. Just as was explained by Brenner (2016), Tieken and Montgomery (2021) reaffirm the fact that Title 1 funds also disadvantage many rural areas due to the formulas used to determine the allocation of funding. Furthermore, many specific grants are useless without proper infrastructure. For example, a grant for new computers is essentially useless if there is no access to high-speed internet or if the building needs major repairs.

Tieken and Montgomery (2021) contend that policies put in place by the state and federal governments simply miss the mark for the rural context. Policies promoting charter schools and school choice, arguably ineffective in any context, are especially ineffective in rural communities where another choice does not even exist. These challenges significantly impact the quality of

education and, consequently, the overall well-being of rural communities. To alleviate these issues, the scholars suggest increased attention, resources, and policy interventions to address these challenges and ensure that rural students have equitable access to high-quality education.

As was made abundantly evident in reviewing the history of the topic of rural education, policy decisions have posed major problems for rural schools. Lavalley (2018) shares the implications of rurality being left “out of the loop” when it comes to research and policy discussions and the fact that these challenges exacerbate the existing issues of poverty, inequity, and isolation felt by rural communities. In accordance with other rural researchers, Lavalley expressed the fact that the potential for American educational rural discourse is often obscured by urban and suburban emphasis. Policy and research tend not to focus on the needs of rural schools and overlook their needs and circumstances.

Lavalley (2018) further addressed a major rural concern, child poverty, which is greater in rural areas than in urban areas, with 64% of rural counties having high rates compared to 57% of urban counties. Deep poverty, which occurs when family income falls below half the poverty level, is also more common in rural areas. Rural families struggle to get resources due to deep and persistent poverty. With 85.3% of persistently impoverished counties being rural, generational poverty hinders economic mobility and long-term development. Although rural areas throughout the nation face poverty, southern states are more severely affected. According to Lavalley, minority students are concentrated in rural America, despite the notion that it is mostly White. Racial disparities in poverty affect minoritized children disproportionately. However, elevated levels of poverty pose a challenge for rural students of all races, as rural White pupils are also likely to attend high-poverty schools. Research shows that high poverty rates affect student literacy, making this an urgent issue (Lavalley, 2018). The impacts of poverty extend far beyond

the immediate and obvious challenges.

Several policies outlined previously when exploring the history of rural education were explicitly mentioned as challenges by Lavalley (2018) as well. The challenge of inapplicable reforms worsens the plethora of difficulties felt by rural schools. Another prominent issue mentioned briefly by Tieken and Montgomery (2021) is the issues associated with the digital divide. Some reform initiatives rely heavily on virtual schools to mitigate the challenges of staffing and resources in rural schools. However, virtual schools rely on technology and internet connections that are not necessarily accessible to rural students. Policies that suggest virtual or charter schools as a solution to challenges further drive the mechanisms of disadvantage, creating issues for rural students and resulting in the perpetuation of multigenerational poverty and educational shortcomings felt by rural communities.

Lavalley (2018) also explained that further academic hurdles exist for rural students. Limited access to advanced courses limits students' academic opportunities. Across the curriculum, students are limited in the number of available courses, particularly academically rigorous programs; this may play a role in the disparity in rural students' college attendance rates. While rural students are more likely to graduate high school, they are less likely to attend college than their nonrural peers. Financial concerns and physical distance from postsecondary educational institutions create academic barriers for rural students with aspirations for college. In addition to this, the K-12 academic experience has its own challenges. For rural schools, the popular reform methods fail to consider rural realities. One manifestation of this is the fact that standard curriculum requirements are irrelevant or ill-informed in the rural context.

To combat this, Lavalley (2018) suggests the implementation of a place-based curriculum. Place-based pedagogy refers to an approach to teaching that contrasts the decontextualized,

standardized approach to education by honoring the local community and environment to create meaningful and relevant educational experiences. This approach is in line with the suggestions made by Biddle and Azano (2016), in that place-based practices are mindful of localized complexities and do consider community characteristics.

Howley (2004) explores the shortcomings of approaches that are not place-based, including the constraints of traditional curricula used in most rural schools, in this theoretical discussion. The challenge presented by Howley includes the fact that educators have become increasingly concerned about curriculum approaches that fail to complement the experiences of rural students. Unfortunately, many curriculum approaches are not grounded in local experience and instead fit a business agenda. According to Howley, most rural schools still rely on traditional curricula, driven by textbooks and standardized tests, due to the influence of big business curriculum writers and neoliberal testing policies. Accountability is focused on meeting state and federal expectations to receive funding rather than valuing local accountability, which would be more beneficial for the community as well as provide a more accurate picture of student progress. Bureaucratic interests subvert the power of rural communities. It is argued that perhaps this issue can be combatted through curriculum decisions that are liberatory focused rather than socially reproducing the challenges at hand (Howley, 2004). This line of argumentation will be further explored through the lens of Freirean ideology.

Historically, Howley (2004) explained that rural schools were directed to prepare students for urban industrial jobs, causing rural schools to attempt to resemble urban schools. Curricula content typically includes traditional subjects like English, math, history, and science, with occasional but limited vocational options. Traditional curriculum aims to prepare students for

future roles, presenting decontextualized facts and sustaining a hidden curriculum³ that perpetuates social class divisions. Progressive curriculum, however, supports students' present development while preparing them to be active and informed participants in their communities in the future.

Traditional curricula that focus on future job preparation devalue students' current circumstances and encourage out-migration from rural areas, creating even more challenges. Howley (2004) stated that progressive educators criticize traditional curricula for overemphasizing discipline-based studies rather than establishing an emphasis on problem-solving and critical thinking skills, which are built on interdisciplinary project-based approaches. For some time, community schools adopted this approach, involving students and educators in community health, economic development, and community beautification efforts. However, the traditional approach ultimately prevailed over time as the standardization of curriculum and testing persisted. Teachers, parents, and community members have expressed discontent with practices they feel do not align with their community values or culture. For many reasons, the local needs and contexts of rural schools have been sidelined. Advocates for place-based pedagogy argue that this approach prepares students to understand and preserve the cultural and ecological integrity of their communities.

This would allow educators to employ curricula that focus on rural life experiences using thematic, interdisciplinary approaches and experiential learning, tying academic content and the natural learning process to the community and supporting cultural stability. Progressive alternatives can also include positioning schools as centers for community economic development, involving students in local businesses, and providing relevant skills for local employment. It is

³ Hidden curriculum includes the things learned, but not explicitly taught, in schools. The term was coined by Jean Anyon (1980) and includes but is not limited to social norms, values, and beliefs. According to Anyon, the hidden curriculum that a student is exposed to differs according to their social class. This system perpetuates social inequalities by implicitly teaching students from different social classes distinct values, behaviors, and expectations. This oppressive practice reinforces already stratified societies and their social hierarchies.

important, of course, to approach these issues from a critical perspective and not with neoliberal intentions. Howley (2004) warns of explicit and hidden curriculum choices that train low socioeconomic status children in the habits of compliance, which tend to occur through the traditional approach.

According to Howley (2004), curriculum alignment should ensure essential content coverage without entirely replacing local curricula. Inclusive discussions involving parents, community members, and educators are crucial for effective curriculum reform. Rural schools should pair curriculum reform with local accountability measures using realistic benchmarks and defensible measurement procedures. Progress portfolios and locally developed assessments can provide a more accurate picture of student progress. Consistent assessment strategies, assessing individual student progress over time, and avoiding generalized testing, are recommended. Balancing federal expectations, state standards, and local curricula remains a major concern and challenge for rural schools to ensure comprehensive and relevant education for rural students.

The barriers that exist are not just felt by the rural student, but by the rural teacher as well. For example, Howley (2004) further stated that rural teachers tend to attend less selective colleges, and higher-qualified teachers tend not to return to rural schools. While it is important to acknowledge that there are strengths, such as the fact that rural teachers are overall more experienced and less likely to enter their roles through alternative certification methods, it is important not to overlook the challenges that negatively impact rural teachers and, consequently, rural students. Rural positions are hard to fill, and rural school turnover rates pose an issue. Due to rural school sizes, the absence of even a single teacher has a disproportionately higher impact than in more heavily populated areas. To combat this, policies turned to consolidation, leading to even more issues for funding rural schools. For existing teachers, access to high-quality

professional development can also pose a challenge.

Johnson et al. (2021) further investigated the issue of achievement and growth in rural American schools. Their quantitative research study is an overview of academic achievement and growth among rural schools. Using data from the National Association of Educational Procurement and Stanford Education Data Archive to analyze student achievement for 840,000 students at 2,377 rural schools, the study's descriptive analysis compares the academic performance and growth rates between rural and nonrural schools across kindergarten to eighth grade. The study also investigated the development of achievement gaps between minoritized (Black or Hispanic) students and White students during both the school year and summer periods.

The findings provide insight that educators and policymakers can use to understand the needs of such schools. Johnson et al. (2021) found that rural students enter kindergarten with a higher academic baseline according to beginning-of-year assessments than nonrural students in math and reading but fall behind nonrural peers by the time they reach middle school. Lavalley (2018) stated that limited resources contributed to the achievement gap. Johnson et al. (2021) expanded on this idea, specifically identifying larger declines in achievement over the summer break. There is variability in achievement and growth dependent on the remoteness of a school. Schools closer to urbanized areas had the highest achievement scores, whereas distant schools had the highest summer learning loss, demonstrating that remote schools could benefit from resources similar to those offered at urban centers.

As suggested by Tieken (2017), the research conducted by Johnson et al. (2021) demonstrates the challenges posed by the effects of spatialization. Achievement gaps amongst different demographics were larger in nonrural schools than in rural schools; for example, the Black/White gap in urban schools is larger than in rural schools. This, again, is reminiscent of the

research conducted by Tieken (2017), which concluded that there is less segregation in rural schools because there are fewer schools in rural areas. According to this research, finding a way to address the summer slide could have huge implications for rural elementary school students.

To achieve academically in school, it is imperative that students have their basic needs met. In addition to issues with poverty, access to medical care and mental health services is another challenge faced by rural students. Nichols et al. (2017) focus on this issue as their research aimed to identify best-practice approaches for the mental health support of rural students and the importance of collaboration between educators and specialized support personnel (SSP) in this endeavor. The purpose was to discuss students social-emotional needs and SSP educator collaboration in rural schools, as well as to discuss best-practices in collaboration to address students social-emotional well-being. The paper discussed the implications of using a multi-tiered support system (MTSS) framework and various mental health programs. MTSS consists of a multi-tiered system that aims to promote high-quality and evidence-based instruction, as well as implement culturally relevant⁴ interventions and behavioral supports for students according to the level of the student's individual needs.

According to Nichols et al. (2017), rural children are at greater risk for mental health problems while simultaneously having less access to mental health care. Rural students experience higher rates of mental health problems compared to their counterparts. This is exacerbated by the fact that rural school students lack access to school psychologists compared to those in suburban or urban environments. Individuals in rural areas are less likely to seek health care, due to fear of community rejection or judgment. Nichols et al. noted that this makes the practice of mental health

⁴ Ladson-Billings (1995) describes culturally relevant pedagogy as an educational approach that centers students' cultural backgrounds, experiences, and identities in the teaching and learning process. This approach aims to empower students academically, socially, and culturally by bridging the gap between their cultural knowledge and the curriculum, thereby fostering academic success as well as critical consciousness

screenings particularly important. Rural communities are characterized as small and close, and often serve as a center for community activity, creating a sense of connectedness and resilience in students. Access to mental health care for community members may help to foster a healthier community overall.

The above articles contextualize the concept of rural education by investigating the history of the topic, as well as addressing the challenges and subsequent needs unique to rural schools and their communities. Clearly, rurality is diverse and difficult to define in a one-size-fits-all capacity. The characteristics of rural populations will be affected by their geographic location and varying cultural components. However, there are similarities found in the rural populations across the nation, including the geographic isolation, which leads to difficulty accessing necessary resources, as well as combatting the fact that American political approaches are generally urban-centric in nature (Jakubowski, 2022). While there are many limiting factors that rural education must combat, there are also a plethora of positive attributes associated with many rural communities. One of those qualities is the capacity for rural communities to be close-knit and the rich culture that is procured from these strong community ties.

3.2 The Importance of Community and Educational Policy in Rural Schools

Despite the aforementioned challenges faced by rural schools and their communities, there are also plenty of unique advantages found in this demographic when taking an asset-based approach. Community closeness in rural communities serves an advantageous role by providing a sense of family, encouraging collaboration, and increasing feelings of accountability as community members (Irdam et al., 2023). The sense of community found in rural schools should be considered when enforcing educational policy. Educational policies heavily dictate the educational outcomes of the communities in which they are imposed. Educational policy in rural America is urban-centric and disadvantageous to the unique needs of rural schools. The generic policies do not take into consideration the need for autonomy and the distinctive requirements for success in the very particular conditions of each unique community. Education policy that is place-based and critically informed can play pivotal roles in addressing and reversing the inequalities experienced in rural America. The objective of this section is to investigate the assets found in rural communities and demonstrate the need for place-based policy decisions.

3.2.1 Importance of Community

One of the greatest assets identified in rural communities is the community itself, and the sense of solidarity felt amongst community members. A strong sense of community can dissuade people from leaving their communities in search of opportunity elsewhere and instead encourage people to develop and enrich the communities in which they feel connected.

To better understand the trend of outmigration that occurs due to the brain-drain phenomenon⁵, the search for employment opportunities, and other influencing factors from rural communities, Irdam et al. (2023) explored the importance of fostering a sense of belonging in rural students. The purpose of this study was to examine how rural youths' sense of classroom belonging to their peers and teachers relates to their rural attachment, community, and proximity aspirations and whether these relationships are moderated by race or ethnicity. Like Miller (1995), Irdam et al. (2023) believe that the education of community members can be used in the pursuit of rural sustainability and argue that the education of rural students can lead to revitalization in their communities. Unlike Miller, their research focused specifically on the implication that the cultivation of a sense of hope and belonging can have on the creation of social capital.

The participants in Irdam et al.'s research study were middle and high school students of various races in math and science courses taught by one of the 20 teachers participating in the five-year rural teacher leadership professional development program. The quantitative research study was in line with belongingness motivation theory⁶, as researchers measured the way the students perceive acceptance, rejection, and inclusion within their classrooms, schools,

⁵ Brain-drain in this context refers specifically to the phenomenon in which talented and educated individuals are “funneled out of their rural communities” in search of more opportunities elsewhere (Sherman & Sage, 2011, p. 1).

⁶ Belongingness motivation theory suggests that a feeling of belonging is a fundamental need which motivates the behavior of individuals, including acting as a motivating factor in maintaining enduring relationships with others that meet this need (Baumeister & Leary, 1995).

and communities. The research aimed to investigate “community aspirations”, or a desire to be a part of and support a community; “proximity aspirations”, or the desire to live close to family and friends in the community; and “rural attachment”, which was measured by the Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure (MEIM) scale⁷.

The findings of Irdam et al. (2023) showed that in terms of rural attachment, there are small effect sizes, indicating that White students have a stronger sense of rural attachment. Peer and teacher belonging also had small effect sizes, indicating that students who felt a sense of belonging in their classroom were also more likely to display rural attachment. When it came to community aspirations, Black students indicated a stronger sense of community aspirations, as did students with a higher sense of peer and teacher belonging. However, trivial effect sizes indicate little statistical significance. Similarly, results regarding proximity aspirations showed some positive association between classroom belonging and proximity aspirations but trivial effects for race/ethnicity. Overall, the findings make it clear that peer and teacher belonging are positively associated with higher rural attachment and community aspirations. It is also evident that the influence of race/ethnicity on the results of this research highlights the need for addressing the unique experiences of minoritized students in rural settings.

Given the importance of a supportive school environment in fostering students’ connections and ambitions within their rural communities, Irdam et al. (2023) imply that teacher classroom belonging can be nurtured through policy and practice and that schools should utilize research-based interventions to increase belonging, particularly for minoritized students. The relationships between students, teachers, and staff are unique in rural contexts. The previously

⁷ The Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure (MEIM) scale was originally created by Phinney (1992) and was introduced as a scale designer to assess ethnic identity among individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds. The MEIM scale aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how individuals perceive and identify with their own ethnic group

mentioned research conducted by Tieken and Montgomery (2021) provided information on another often overlooked aspect of the role rural schools play in their community. Rural schools may be a community's largest employer, and school employees are often familiar with family members and community members. This illustrates one of many connections between the rural community and its schools and demonstrates the importance of community belonging. Based on the information from that research, to end the perpetuation of the social and economic challenges that exist in rural communities, which lead to their marginalization, it may be important to focus on increasing the feeling of belonging among students. This practice can curb outmigration and prevent a brain-drain phenomenon.

The question then becomes: how is an increase in belonging established? An increased sense of belonging could result from an increase in community engagement, perhaps through the use of place-based pedagogies and relevant curriculum choices. As the above research by Irdam et al. (2023) indicated, reframing educational policies could also encourage an increased sense of rural attachment.

Building upon the quest for enhancing a sense of belonging in rural education settings, Schafft (2016) examined the issues faced by rural education, which are caused by ineffective public policy and educational practices. This research takes into consideration the relationship between rural education and rural community development. This theoretical exploration into the connections between rural education and rural development used the methodology of place-based education as well as an understanding of the responsive vs. responsible framework. In this application of the term, a responsive approach coincides with the traditional idea that education is a means of producing human capital for the perpetuation of global capitalism. Human capital refers to the economic value of a person's skills, knowledge, and abilities, which are seen as assets that

contribute to productivity and economic growth. The responsive approach emphasizes efficiency, whereas the responsible approach emphasizes equity. The responsible approach is more critical and democratic in nature, and frames education as a means for providing knowledge and skills that qualify people to do things in an informed and responsible manner. Schafft argues for a shift in perspective from the uncritical responsive approach to the more holistic responsible approach that would lead to policies more attuned to the needs and potential of rural communities.

Moreover, Schafft (2016) explained that schools exist as both state and local institutions. He reiterates what has been stated by the previous scholars: that rural schools have an enhanced school-to-community relationship because of school and community population sizes and the isolated nature of their geographic locations. Rural schools serve as multifaceted influencers within their communities, contributing to education, culture, civic engagement, economics, and symbolic representation. However, further challenging Miller (1995), Schafft (2016) specifically articulated the fact that neoliberal reforms have shifted the focus of K-12 schooling towards private commodities rather than public goods, diluting the role of education. Despite this, rural schools remain vital institutions, playing a crucial role in community development and fostering local economies. Engagement between rural schools and their communities aims to bolster local economic growth and establish resilient community foundations, emphasizing the importance of context-specific approaches over ineffective policy solutions.

Further, Schafft (2016) argued that schools should not solely prioritize economic growth but should also address social, civic, environmental, and ethical concerns. Proponents of equity warn against policies overly focused on efficiency, as this short-sighted approach will likely exacerbate structural inequality and lead to further issues rather than the mitigation or elimination of any problems.

The concept of community is discussed in nearly all the research regarding rural education, indicating the immense influence that the community and the school have on one another in the rural context. As scholars underscore the pivotal role of community in rural education, it becomes evident that the relationship between educational policy and community dynamics significantly shapes the landscape of rural schooling.

3.2.2 Influence of Policy

Policy plays a crucial role in addressing the unique challenges in rural schools. Policy decisions at the local, state, and federal levels all have significant impacts on schools and, consequently, their communities. Understanding the influence of policy decisions and their effects is vital to encouraging success and sustainability in rural education.

To determine the effects of ill-informed policy, Biddle and Schafft (2014) researched policy implications. Like Schafft (2016) later reiterates individually, Biddle and Schafft (2014) state that the current neoliberal policy-making decisions replicate and reproduce the challenges felt in marginalized rural schools and communities, thus exacerbating disadvantages. They suggest that an overall policy shift has been made in American education, including an increased emphasis on school choice, an increase in privatization, standardization of curricula and assessment, and a focus on creating human capital, which has worsened existing issues found in rural schools.

These scholars further note that school choice, which allows guardians to select educational settings such as public, charter, or private schools for their children, can exacerbate inequality, drain resources from public schools, increase segregation, reduce accountability, and weaken community ties. Privatization of schools is the process of transferring public education services, management, or ownership to private entities. Biddle and Schafft (2014) explained that privatization is often promoted as a way to increase efficiency and choice, but in reality, it has negative effects on educational equity and accountability and jeopardizes the public nature of education. Neoliberal education policies prioritize the creation of human capital over the holistic and meaningful education of students. Under neoliberalism, education is often viewed primarily as a means to develop these assets, focusing on preparing students for the workforce and enhancing their marketable skills. This narrow focus is far from comprehensive, does not provide enriching

educational experiences, and neglects to address the diverse needs and potentials of all students outside of what they can contribute to the capitalist system.

One way these issues are illustrated by Biddle and Schafft (2014) is in the fact that low-population rural communities with limited administrative capacity create disadvantages for rural districts as they compete with more highly populated areas for resources. Policies that turn to privatized solutions for existing educational inequities disproportionately harm rural areas. Instead, the researchers suggest policymaking that focuses on strengthening public schools as civic institutions, honoring and strengthening the community rather than undermining it.

One reason for poor policy outcomes is explained in Jakubowski's (2022) work, which examined urban-normative state policy implementation on education reform in rural areas, focusing specifically on two case studies. Urban-normative or urban-centric perspectives can be described as a bias towards urban environments, believing urban environments to be the "norm" and therefore gaining more attention and resources, resulting in discrimination against rural environments. The article examined how New York's educational policy had alienated rural residents since the 1930s. Given the history of rural education previously outlined, the findings are unsurprising. The research revealed a longstanding pattern of rural communities, exemplified by the case study in Morganville, opposing state education policies due to perceived neglect of their values and autonomy, leading to persistent resistance against centralization efforts.

With these findings in mind, Jakubowski (2022) suggests a new theory be applied to account for the shortcomings of implementation theory, one that would include local stakeholders and increase their agency and participation in policy implementation. Jakubowski examined how such urban-centric policies have altered and undermined trust in state government reforms, particularly in rural communities. By analyzing efforts by these communities to assert local control

amidst state policy implementation, the study revealed a trend wherein rural values are often marginalized in favor of state-driven efficiency and effectiveness goals. Drawing on archival qualitative evidence, the case study illustrates events that have influenced the dynamic between rural residents and the state over the past 70 years. Jakubowski's paper suggests a reevaluation of implementation theory, the study of improving the process of translating policy ideas or interventions into actual practice and ensuring that policymakers incorporate the influence of local stakeholders, moving beyond the traditional focus solely on government officials.

The case studies included in Jakubowski's (2022) research included specific examples of resistance to ineffective policy decisions. For example, the community members in the included case studies engaged in civic action in the form of community meetings, where local residents participated in community meetings and voting processes to voice their opposition to plans for centralization. Civil disobedience and resistance in the forms of boycotts, petitions, appeals, and threats of legal action were found in these case studies. Fighting against the threats of centralization, community members expressed their opposition and advocated for their rights through petition writing and appeals to the State Education Department, asking for reconsideration of centralization plans. As frustrations grew, community members also threatened legal action should the centralization process continue despite their voiced dissatisfaction. Media coverage was also utilized to broadcast the conflict between the community and the State Department, bringing more public attention to the issue and putting pressure on state authorities to address the concerns being raised by residents. The utilization of historical narratives also provided leverage to community members, as historical societies and museums, which aimed to preserve their heritage and history, advocated for preservation rather than consolidation. Furthermore, celebration and recognition followed resistance efforts, thus encouraging similar behavior in the future. To

celebrate their success, leaders of the resistance were honored by their community in a community gathering, highlighting the importance of community solidarity and perseverance in the face of adversity.

Johnson and Howley (2015) detail contemporary federal education policy and the way it manifests in rural schools. In their theoretical research article, the authors argue that contemporary federal educational policies are not effective in alleviating the unique challenges and opportunities found in rural schools and communities. The authors consider the effects of the three major educational policies, namely the Race to the Top⁸ grant (RTT), the School Improvement Grant⁹ (SIG), and the Rural Education Achievement Program (REAP), implemented in the post No Child Left Behind (NCLB) era, by applying the critical policy analysis framework. The authors describe the ways that federal policies that were meant to drive school improvement are ineffective for rural schools and can even be harmful to the schools and their communities. They contend that programs, even those specifically dedicated to rural school improvement, such as REAP, overlook the realities of rural schools and fail to engage with the regional variations of rurality, resulting in unfavorable outcomes that contradict the initial policy goals.

Reminiscent of the sentiments shared by Tieken (2017) regarding the dangers of pervasive stereotypes influencing the way rural communities are perceived and the consequences of these biases, Johnson and Howley (2015) stated that even the few existing policies that are explicitly designed for rural schools generally fail to consider the diversity that exists within rural schools,

⁸ Race to the Top was a competitive grant program launched in 2009 to fund states and districts implementing education reforms. Starting 2010, it awarded \$4 billion to states for K–12 education reform in areas like state capacity, teacher effectiveness, standards, data systems, school turnaround, and charter schools. (U.S. Department of Education).

⁹ School Improvement Grants authorized by Title I, Section 1003(g) of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, aimed to enhance the nation's lowest-achieving schools. From 2009 to 2016, SIG received over \$7 billion, allocated based on Title I formulas to states, that then competitively distributed funds to eligible districts. Schools receiving SIG funds between 2010 and 2013 were mandated to adopt one of four intervention models: transformation, turnaround, restart, or closure, over a three-year period. (U.S. Department of Education).

consequently creating unpredictable and undesirable results. It was found that the achievement gaps that exist everywhere manifest differently in rural schools, typically more intensely. The scholars reiterate the fact that rural schools have several advantages, including lower size and better community ties. They also believe that policy infrastructure without attention to rural contexts causes a lack of effective professional development, fiscal sufficiency, and specialized services; rural schools' fiscal problems stem from poor policymaking and are influenced by issues related to rural education, such as lower property values, a smaller organizational scale, a declining population, and transportation issues.

Johnson and Howley (2015) began their analysis of programs meant to alleviate the issues with the RTT Program, which demonstrates obvious neoliberal influence and intentions. In this program, schools were meant to compete with one another to earn awards by aligning with federal desiderata and implementing reforms meant to turn around “bad schools” through United States Department of Education (USDOE) initiatives. The rewards disbursed from this grant went largely to predominantly urban states. Criticism from rural advocates led to a provision that was intended to benefit rural applicants for the grant in the form of a new competition called the Race to the Top District Program (RTT-D). In this part of the grant, rural status was considered a priority. However, this priority was compromised by concurrent existing provisions such as minimum population size requirements and a failure to consider a lack of private resources. The scholars suggest that this proverbial “race to the top” was not a race worth winning and that the “top” was transitional greed fueled by neoliberal purposes. On top of this, the results of RTT for rural schools proved rural disconnect. RTT funds are tied to a one-size-fits-all initiative, which can be destructive to rural schools and communities due to their unique circumstances. The neoliberal commitments associated with RTT are particularly harmful to rural communities post-industrial revolution that

are exploited for their natural resources and labor and used as dumping grounds. Johnson and Howley (2015) stated that this race to the top is a race that is unwinnable for such communities and will ultimately lead to the downfall of any community due to its unsustainable ideals.

The Title 1 SIGs, Johnson and Howley (2015) explain, were awarded by the USDOE under the ESEA of 1965 and reauthorized under NCLB in 2002. It is claimed that SIGs aim to fund state education departments with competitive grant money meant to be distributed as awards allocated to impoverished districts that demonstrate raised test scores in low-performing schools. Similarly to RTT, the 2008 economic collapse led to an increase in funds for SIG, and SIG was awarded under similar circumstances as RTT money. Upon analysis, the distribution of these funds proved ineffective. As with RTT, the program was not effective in rural communities for the same underlying neoliberal reasons. Only 18% of recipients of SIGs were rural schools, while 58% of recipients were urban schools, also demonstrating urban-centric policy choices.

Lastly, Johnson and Howley analyzed the results of REAP, which explicitly targets rural schools. However, just as Biddle and Azano (2016) pointed out, they conclude that policymakers often mistake rurality as a single, monolithic entity. REAP was enacted through ESEA and then reauthorized under NCLB with two main initiatives in mind. The initiatives, Small Rural School Achievement (SRSA) and Rural and Low-Income Schools (RLIS), were meant to help rural districts that struggled to compete for federal grants. However, these initiatives proved to have many shortcomings, particularly restrictive eligibility criteria and limited funding that failed to meet the diverse needs of rural districts. The REAP initiatives provided minimal grants, which proved to be insufficient to affect any substantial improvements. Insufficient understanding of and potential bias against rural realities resulted in failed programs. Johnson and Howley concluded that the policymakers' combination of disregard for the limited existing rural educational research

and ignorance of the history associated with rural education caused more harm than benefit to many rural schools. It is evident that these policy failures have translated rural strengths into weaknesses, thereby rendering schools inefficient and ineffective. These scholars suggest that neoliberal policies not only overlook rural realities but intentionally attempt to make them conform to and align with the commitments of policymakers.

In summary, the literature makes it clear that many current reform tactics and policy decisions ignore the significant role the community plays in rural schools. By synthesizing the insights from Biddle and Schafft (2014), Jakubowski (2022), and Johnson and Howley (2015), it becomes transparent that the success of rural education is contingent on a deep understanding of the unique challenges and opportunities that these communities face. Embracing this complexity and fostering policies that genuinely support rural schools can transform educational institutions into thriving centers of learning and community life, ultimately contributing to the broader goal of educational equity and excellence for the entire community. Thus, the path forward for rural education requires a shift from urban-centric and neoliberal approaches to policies that honor the distinct identities of rural schools and leverage their inherent strengths. Empowering local stakeholders, enhancing community participation in policymaking, and tailoring educational initiatives to the diverse realities of rural contexts are likely essential for achieving sustainable and meaningful improvements in rural education. The conditions that create unique challenges in rural communities also present opportunities for unique strengths, particularly the ability to foster a sense of solidarity and community belongingness.

3.3 Suggested Informed Pedagogical and Policy Approaches for Rural Schools

Given the strengths associated with rural schools and communities, it is imperative not to approach their issues with a deficit mindset. Researchers have studied best-practice approaches to policy and pedagogy that are specific to the needs and conditions of rural American schools. Considering the history of rural America as well as the global direction for the future, educational researchers have indicated that research-backed and place-based critical approaches that value autonomy, solidarity, liberation, and community can help rural communities thrive through effective approaches to education. By implementing informed pedagogical and policy approaches, rural spaces can flourish rather than decay.

3.3.1 Critically Informed Pedagogy

Pedagogical approaches that are informed by research and integrate an understanding of the contextual, cultural, and social dynamics of rural populations are necessary to cultivate rural communities that implement best-practice approaches in their schools. Place-based education, as well as culturally sustaining pedagogy, are examples of methodologies that are more inclusive, engaging, and effective at creating learning environments that will best serve all rural students. Some scholars have argued for the use of Freirean ideology, which focuses on critical awareness, to reframe rural challenges and opportunities in modern American schools. Azano and Biddle (2019) explain the way deficit narratives in rural education research perpetuate oppressive structures and limit the potential for meaningful change in rural communities. Instead, they propose a reframing of rural education discourse that embraces critical consciousness and advocates for a more equitable and empowering approach to rural education research and practice. This is a theoretical article that explains the importance of focusing on counter-narratives of hope rather than through a deficit lens or a lens of loss.

Azano and Biddle (2019) apply Freirean ideology to several different concepts regarding modern rural education, including theories of oppression and critical awareness. They discuss conscientização, which is the awareness of social, political, and economic inequities and taking meaningful action against them. The scholars then demonstrate how using these theories would serve as rural praxis for educational leaders and teachers. Rural praxis in this context refers to the methods with which people can transform rural education from a position of marginality and disadvantage to one of empowerment through actions taken, including the application of critical reflection and transformative action specifically tailored to the unique needs of rural communities. The scholars discuss the assumption of a dichotomous relationship between the world and the self,

particularly the way that this misconception can apply to members of the rural education community. The dichotomous relationship with the self refers to the conceptual divide in which individuals perceive themselves as separate entities from the world around them, internalizing a separation that implies a passive observant role rather than an active participant. This fallacious way of thinking limits personal and collective agency and instead cultivates feelings of alienation and isolation. In the context of education, economic and social marginalization can lead to a sense of powerlessness to change the deficit narratives applied to communities and a perceived inability to change the status quo by rejecting inefficient educational practices and policies.

Freire's educational philosophy, as Azano and Biddle (2019) explained, aims to rectify these feelings of internalized helplessness, and instead replace these feelings with critical awareness that will allow community members to function as agents of change, empowered in their active role as the deciders of their own destiny. Freire suggests that collective action serves as a framework that can be applied to understand the oppressive as well as the emancipatory influences in rural communities. Human beings, he suggests, should be equipped with the ability to "not only critically reflect upon their existence but critically act on it" to "emerge" from "submersion" and to "intervene" in their own realities through conscientização and "emerge" liberated from oppression (Freire, 1970, p. 109). The findings of Azano and Biddle prove the importance of developing authentic ways to resist and change the structures that oppress rural communities.

Further, Azano and Biddle (2019) emphasized the importance of praxis in the forms of educational leadership, classroom teaching, and educator preparation to incite change. Educational leaders, they suggest, must understand the distinct challenges and leverage the unique community qualities to lead to innovative new realities for rural communities. Educational leaders must navigate the paradox of preparing students for the global workforce while also fostering

community sustainability. Praxis in the form of engaging the community in the discourse of collective well-being and mobility and dialogue on collective history and cultural wealth can be particularly powerful. Classroom teachers can also implement rural praxis to play a pivotal role in liberating their rural communities. Firstly, educators should reject neoliberal banking models of education¹⁰, standardized approaches that are efficient and market-oriented, treating students as passive recipients of knowledge rather than active participants in the learning process. This is reminiscent of the distinction Howley (2004) made between traditional and progressive curriculum approaches.

In agreement with Lavalley (2018) and Howley (2004), Azano and Biddle (2019) believe that place-based educational pedagogy is a vital solution to some of the challenges felt in rural schools. The implementation of place-based pedagogy will allow educators to integrate both their local knowledge as well as global understandings; classroom teachers can encourage active and critical engagement in their students. Teaching a curriculum that is both locally relevant and globally informed will provide rural students with a comprehensive education that prepares them to be active, informed citizens with more to contribute to the world than labor and human capital. Educator preparation is another vital avenue for implementing rural praxis. They note that educational leadership and teacher preparation programs often overlook the unique needs of rural contexts. Thus, Azano and Biddle suggest there is a need for preparation programs that integrate social justice and context-specific preparation in addition to universally applied preparation methods. Additionally, they reiterate the claims made previously by Tieken (2017), as Azano and

¹⁰ Freire (1970) explains the banking concept as an approach to education that follows several oppressive attitudes, including “the teacher teaches, and the students are taught” and “the teacher knows everything, and the student knows nothing” (p. 73). He asserts that this is an alienating and dehumanizing practice, as well as a method of domination. Banking education perceives the student as mere objects or an “empty vessel to be filled” (Freire, 1970, p. 79).

Biddle (2019) encourage an approach to teacher education that acknowledges a nuanced view of rurality and urbanity, break down the false dichotomy between the two and recognize the interdependence of different spaces, emphasize the importance of place, and addresses the complex social narratives and challenges that exist in each.

The next approach offers an alternative to the oppressive banking system of education, as place-based writing practices were used to procure promising results in the research article written by Donovan (2016). This qualitative case study investigated how place-based writing practices affect rural middle school students' connections with their home community, as evidenced through their writing. Conducted in a rural Title 1 middle school in North Carolina serving 644 students with a large representation of Black and Hispanic students, the research aimed to identify the ways incorporating local contexts into writing instruction can enhance the educational experience and outcomes of students. This approach aligns with the broader goals of revitalizing rural education by making learning relevant, engaging, and empowering for students.

Using the critical pedagogy of place¹¹ theoretical framework, Donovan (2016) stated that educators and students can better connect with their environments, as well as have more authentic and effective learning experiences. Place-based writing practices help empower rural students by providing opportunities for students to stay in touch with their communities while also developing their personal identities. These practices can effectively be used to supplement and enhance any provided standardized curriculum, as they allow students to explore their identities and lead to authentic engagement in the classroom. After the implementation of this framework, students were able to write longer pieces with fewer errors. Students wrote with more complexity and engaged

¹¹ Critical pedagogy of place synthesizes critical pedagogy with place-based education, aiming to create educational discourse and practices that examine the “place-specific nexus between the environment, culture, and education” that is “linked to cultural and ecological politics” and “informed by an ethic of eco-justice” (Gruenewald 2003, p. 10).

in critical discourse. Students had greater freedom of expression and experienced higher motivation to engage with their assignments. The scholar attributes these improvements to the fact that students were able to express themselves more naturally and confidently, students connected to topics with real-world implications, and students were empowered as community members.

Through the conducted research, Donovan (2016) provided evidence that demonstrates the connection between the place-based framework and writing. The findings of this research highlight several key aspects, including the importance of assignments and curriculum that have relevance to students' lives, which not only allow students to make meaningful connections to their own identities and communities but also foster a deeper connection to the subject matter and procure better academic results. Because of the positive implications of this pedagogical approach, the rural teachers who are currently struggling to teach the standardized curriculum and comply with disillusioned district expectations should be trained in the critical pedagogy of place to better serve their students. The same positive outcomes can likely be applied to all subjects.

DiCerbo and Baker (2021) conducted their qualitative study, in which they asked rural educators of English learners (ELs) how they culturally position themselves and their students, with similar intentions as Donovan (2016), but with a greater focus on teachers than on students. Informed by culturally sustaining pedagogy¹² and cultural positioning theory¹³, the scholars sought to identify how these frameworks interact with the concepts of rurality through teacher narratives. Culturally sustaining pedagogy is a critical framework that combats the neoliberal and White normative ideologies pervasive in the American education system. This lens provides

¹² This pedagogical approach, introduced by Paris (2012), not only acknowledges cultural diversity but actively seeks to support and affirm it within educational contexts. Culturally sustaining pedagogy aims to preserve and perpetuate linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism, working from the concepts of culturally relevant and culturally responsive

¹³ Cultural positioning theory is based on the belief that "positioning can be understood as the discursive construction of personal stories that make a person's actions intelligible and relatively determinate as social acts" (Harré & van Langenhove, 1991, p. 395).

an alternative perspective, recognizing not only the existence of oppression in the education system but also the fact that these systems of oppression are an inherent and intentional aspect of an institution that socializes students into accepting the hegemonic power systems at play.

Cultural positioning theory can be used to understand the relationship between teachers and their students, as the focus is to explain one's positioning as the discursive construction of personal stories that influence one's development and behavior and the ways they interact with themselves and others. Data analysis from DiCerbo and Baker's study (2021) unveiled reoccurring themes in the teacher's written discourse that demonstrated their sense of cultural place in the forms of social identifiers as they examined their own cultures. These social identifiers included faith, race, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, language, gender, disability, and values. In doing this, teachers uncovered connections and relationships between themselves and their students. The activity allowed teachers to become more acutely aware of how their identities influence their teaching and how their teaching can influence their students and be used to create more productive communities.

This research conducted by DiCerbo and Baker (2021) demonstrated the ways that engaging in autobiographical writing can help rural educators make sense of their own personal stories as well as their professional identities, which can then allow them to better implement culturally sustaining pedagogical practices for their students. In this specific case, the research suggests that autobiographical writing is an effective first step toward creating culturally sustaining pedagogy for EL students. The scholars state that when teachers begin to understand the importance of cultural sustainability by starting with their own lives, this new understanding can then be translated into their relationships with their students. This is especially important for teachers working with ELs, and, ostensibly, other social identifiers, as they find ways to connect with and

relate to their students. The researchers express that while it is important for any teacher to engage in such a practice, it is especially important for rural teachers working with new populations as the demographics of rural communities continue to evolve. The research in this study has implications for further research regarding the ways culturally sustaining pedagogical approaches can influence rural schools and address the diverse needs of rural students.

While Johnson et al. (2021) identified the specific issue of summer learning loss as a major contributing factor to the rural academic achievement gap, O’Connell (2023) conducted research on a promising practice that can help alleviate the effects of summer slide over the course of four years from 2019 to 2022 through the Literacy Academy Program. These scholars note that options for summer learning experiences are often limited for rural students as a result of the challenges associated with geographic isolation and funding inadequacy. Not only do school budgets not always include summer programs, but a lack of bussing to the few existing programs also causes another barrier for students. In addition to this, libraries, museums, and summer camps are not readily available for rural students. When students are not engaged in learning opportunities during the summer months, they often lose or regress on skills they learned during the school year, resulting in summer slide learning loss as indicated by their academic performance upon their return to school. Summer slide makes academic endeavors more difficult upon rural students’ return to school, as the loss of skills prevents teachers from building new skills based on proper knowledge because they are instead forced to review what has already been learned. As Johnson et al. (2021) established previously, this summer slide phenomenon contributes to the learning gap between rural and nonrural students.

O’Connell’s (2023) mixed-methods research examined the summer Literacy Academy in a Title 1 rural Minnesota school to evaluate the effectiveness and sustainability of reallocating

school resources to facilitate the proposed program. Prior to the Literacy Academy, there was only a punitive summer school consequence for seventh and eighth-grade students who had failed a course the previous school year. This summer school had no school-year resources provided for students, meaning they were not provided transportation, meals, or books.

O'Connell (2023) shared that in 2019, the Literacy Academy was developed by one of the teachers at the school. The program was meant to combat the learning loss that was documented each fall. The teacher created the program using engaging and motivating efforts meant to be appealing and relevant to the students, as well as evidence-based literacy practices. Participating staff received training on the Literacy Academy curriculum, which implemented place-based pedagogy. She had to personally advocate for access to the necessary resources to facilitate this program. She was able to acquire approval for transportation from school board members and secured a grant providing summer meals for all children under 18 in the community. There were also issues regarding access to books, as the school library was closed during the summer months and the nearest public libraries were inaccessible to the families in the remote rural community. To alleviate this issue, the teacher sought out support from the community, resulting in community businesses donating books and grants that allowed participants in the summer program to have free books to bring home and keep.

The findings from O'Connell (2023) demonstrated very promising results and highlighted the need for equitable, enriching summer learning programs in rural communities. Improvements were observed in both literacy growth as well as social skills. While the impact of COVID-19 complicated the program and the research, findings still indicated that with every year of implementation, even more students demonstrated growth over the summer when assessed at the beginning of the next school year. The Literacy Academy demonstrated significant success in not

only mitigating the summer slide but actually replacing losses with learning gains over the summer months. Additionally, the summer Literacy Academy provided an unanticipated positive outcome in the form of enhanced student social interactions that were much needed post-quarantine. Students were able to maintain social connections over the summer while also developing their reading skills through free play, structured activities, and shared meals. The findings from this study have major implications; enrichment was more effective than remediation. The positive and engaging environment not only provided basic needs to students and prevented regression over the summer but also increased academic performance and developed key social skills. By adopting similar models, schools can provide food security to their students, strengthen community ties, and empower students through place-based education that also strengthens literacy skills.

Informed pedagogy is essential for addressing the unique challenges of rural communities and schools. Research-based approaches like place-based education, cultural sustaining pedagogy, and Freirean ideology create more inclusive, engaging, and effective learning environments. These methodologies enhance rural students' educational experiences and empower them as active participants in their learning and community development. Azano and Biddle (2019) emphasized critical consciousness and collective action to overcome oppressive structures and foster change. Their focus on educational leadership, classroom teaching, and educator preparation highlights the need for a comprehensive approach to rural education reform. Donovan (2016) demonstrated that the application of place-based writing practices improves student engagement and academic performance by connecting learning to local contexts and identities. DiCerbo and Baker (2021) showed that culturally sustaining pedagogy helps rural educators understand and meet the diverse needs of their diverse students by reflecting on their own cultural identities in order to develop more empathetic and effective teaching practices.

In summary, informed pedagogical approaches tailored to the social, cultural, and contextual dynamics of rural communities are crucial for transforming rural education. These strategies improve academic outcomes and foster empowerment and agency among students and educators, contributing to the sustainability and well-being of rural communities.

3.3.2 Critically Informed Policy

While it is apparent that further research is needed in this area of study, several existing studies provide beneficial information that can allow for more evidence-based decision-making. Some of the existing research on policies includes specific policies to potentially implement and frameworks for analyzing policy efficacy. Hartman et al. (2022) encourage future research in rural schools in a way that is responsive and reflective of the diverse demographic that represents rural people. The focus of this grounded theory research study includes the priorities for both current and future rural educational research to support the efforts of rural education and to advise policymakers, community leaders and activists, nonprofit organizations, and funding organizations that contribute to the vitality of rural schools and their communities.

In the 2022-2027 Rural Research Agenda, Hartman et al. (2022) centered their focus on spatial and educational equity with five interconnected themes, including: 1. policy and funding, 2. teacher/leader recruitment, retention, and preparation, 3. college and career trajectory, 4. community partnerships and relationships, and 5. health and wellness. Each of the themes aims to inform further studies and enhance the educational experiences and outcomes for students at rural schools. Additionally, each theme is described as interconnected through the overarching themes of spatial and educational equity. Through the applied intersectional approach, the researchers hope to frame the issues of spatial and educational equity in relation to other identities, including race, socioeconomic status, gender, disability, etc.

The first theme, as explained by Hartman et al. (2022), is policy and funding. This theme explores the ways policy and funding structures impact rural education. The focus area of this theme seeks to assess the adequacy of the funding distributed to rural schools as well as examine the effects of state and federal policy choices on rural education systems. The aim of this

focus is to investigate how policy changes can be used to reduce existing disparities and instead promote equity. Specific policy decisions such as funding formula equity, school consolidation efforts, teacher salary, access to early childhood education, and consideration for the evolving demographic makeup of rural schools are of major concern. The objective of the teacher and leader recruitment theme is to address the challenges of attracting, retaining, and preparing high-quality educators and leaders in rural schools. This theme focuses on the development of strategies to recruit and train teachers and leaders, including identifying factors that influence retention. Increasing the effectiveness of teacher preparation programs in meeting the needs of rural educators and centering equity and justice are also crucial elements of this theme (Hartman et al., 2022).

College and career trajectory attempts to enhance college and career readiness. This theme, as elucidated by Hartman et al. (2022), investigates the barriers in place that prevent rural students from realizing opportunities in higher education or vocational training. With this theme, the goal is to identify when deficit ideologies such as classism or racism are imposed on rural students and to instead help construct promising pathways and supports towards continuing education.

Community partnerships and relationships aim to leverage community ties and utilize community resources and relationships to support rural schools. This theme aims to understand the partnership power dynamics at play in community partnerships while assessing the role of community involvement in enhancing educational outcomes. Additionally, this theme aims to discover ways in which a bidirectional partnership can be established, meaning that there is mutual benefit between the community partner and the community schools to encourage community success overall (Hartman et al., 2022).

Hartman et al. (2022) then clarified that a focus on health and wellness hopes to promote

the physical and mental well-being of rural students. The researchers suggest that the provision of models for supporting mental health and creating support that is tailored to the rural setting, as well as access to specialized staff, is imperative. Access to health care in general, and specifically to diagnosis care and early intervention and prevention, can help the well-being of rural children. Additionally, identifying the interrelationship between community health and environmental health is another area of focus for this theme.

These areas of focus chosen by Hartman et al. (2022) reflect the beliefs of Schafft (2016) and Johnson and Howley (2015), as they both express the vital connection between the vitality of a school and the well-being of the physical environment in which it exists. It also reflects the ideas shared by Nichols et al. (2017) pertaining to the importance of accessing mental health care, with Hartman et al. (2022) extending this claim to the accessibility of health care in general.

Beyond speculating about which research might be most useful, it is imperative to actually conduct research to determine the efficacy of educational policy. A 2019 case study by Wilcox and Zuckerman does just that through its investigation of research-practice partnerships (RPPs). These scholars explore the impact of RPPs using improvement science (IS) on student outcomes in rural schools. IS allows educators to employ a systematic approach to improving educational outcomes and practices. RPP is defined as a long-term collaborative approach to conducting research, in this case specifically focused on rural areas and communities, that integrates research and practical applications with the aim of investigating problems and finding solutions that can be used to improve schools and school districts (Coburn, Penuel, & Geil, 2013).

According to this research, Wilcox and Zuckerman (2019) explained that RPPs employing IS are effective in positively impacting educators' willingness and ability to engage with

improvement efforts that benefit students in rural schools. Data was collected from Fall 2015-Spring 2018 in the Fort Plain Central School District (FPCSD) in New York, a high-needs rural fringe district. Data collected included interviews, surveys, and field notes. A set of processes called “Compare processes and practices to evidence-based practices, Assess priorities based upon local constraints and affordances, Select evidence-based practices, Set SMART goals, Action Plan, Implement Plan, Monitor” (COMPASS-AIM) is the RPP that was studied. This process is based on the theoretical and empirical literature on organizational improvement (Wilcox & Zuckerman, 2019, p. 1).

The findings from Wilcox and Zuckerman’s (2019) study showed that utilizing COMPASS-AIM helped to build district-wide commitments and shared goals, allowing for coherence between the studied schools in their improvement work. The study’s findings indicated that RPP involvement has positive impacts on student outcomes in areas such as literacy performance, student engagement, attendance, and graduation rates. By focusing on proximal outcomes as indicators of progress toward goals, RPPs help schools identify and rectify cases of disparity by promoting equitable outcomes for students. Additionally, by examining the mechanisms through which RPPs influence educator attitudes, behaviors, and cognitive processes, researchers can gain insight into how to support school improvement efforts in diverse contexts most effectively. The study highlights the importance of collaborative partnerships between researchers, educators, policymakers, and community stakeholders in driving school improvement plans.

A vital element in advocating and implementing informed policy is the ability to analyze existing policies and apply what has been learned. Brenner (2023) suggests the implementation of Rural Critical Policy Analysis (RCPA). This is the same intersectional framework that was

implemented by Johnson and Howley (2015). In this theoretical article, Brenner makes the argument that rural educators and advocates should implement RCPA to evaluate policies and their impacts on rural schools and districts because it offers a more nuanced and critical approach. The research is informed by the scholar's location in Mississippi and their experience with rural educational proposals and policies there. This piece of literature is a policy brief in which the scholar explicitly warns about policies implemented with a deficit perspective of rural places. Instead, Brenner advocates for the use of RCPA as a framework for examining policy through a rural lens.

Brenner's (2023) research results illustrated the ways in which RCPA asks those creating educational policies that will affect rural schools to consider the fact that the people affected are often disenfranchised and disempowered by the policy. To do this, policymakers must keep in mind that most educational policy over the centuries has been urban-centric and makes incorrect assumptions about rural places, and that when rural places are considered, it is often through a deficit perspective. RCPA is a framework that would allow policymakers to approach the issues of race, class, gender, and geography instead through an intersectional lens. RCPA allows policymakers to consider rurality as a significant identity that is often marginalized. RCPA ensures that policies serve the diverse people and places that exist under the category of rural and make the policies that affect them more equitable by considering their unique characteristics.

The findings from Brenner (2023) align with the beliefs expressed in the research by Johnson and Howley (2015), in which they express the fact that poor policy decisions often have opposite effects from their intended outcome due to the fact that neoliberal policies enforced in rural schools are inefficient and ineffective because rural realities are consistently overlooked. These scholars provide what they call practical recommendations for local rural educators. There are several suggestions, including avoiding wasting funding opportunities on fads and not relying

on conventionality since conventional neoliberal ideologies are damaging to rural schools and communities. Instead, they suggest seeking grants that are appropriate for their needs from rural-friendly sources. In addition to this, they emphasize once again the importance of community, arguing that, when possible, the community should be involved in projects and exemptions should be sought after to avoid bureaucratic regulations that are not suitable for rural schools. Furthermore, Johnson and Howley state that all community members should be involved in a process that aims to advocate for state-level policy changes that would benefit rural schools.

In another policy approach, La Prad (2016) writes about the use of the Coalition of Essential Schools (CES) model in rural schools. This article uses a grounded theory approach to investigate and describe the impact of the CES reform model on participating rural high schools. The CES framework emphasizes a set of common principles meant to promote meaningful learning experiences in schools. These principles include a commitment to the values affiliated with CES, including justice, democracy, and citizenship. CES models also advocate for the implementation of student-centered pedagogies, interdisciplinary learning opportunities, and personalized pathways to success for students.

Biddle and Schafft (2014) warned against many negative implications of neoliberal policies, including the jeopardization of the public nature of schools. La Prad (2016) found that through the use of CES, the participating schools perceive themselves as and operate as public schools that have public interests. The data collected by La Prad (2016) demonstrated the ways that CES participants employ advisories to enhance the interpersonal relationship between teachers and students. The participants thought of innovative ways to maximize their time and maximize student and teacher relationships, dedicating time and resources to the success of the students. Advisories, small and regulated group meetings that consist of a teacher and students, play a crucial

role in the CES model and provide a structured time and space for students to receive academic, emotional, and social support from a trusted adult. Advisories help to foster a sense of belonging and community within the school and are an integral part of establishing a student-centered learning environment.

La Prad (2016) explored the way CES schools employ various pedagogical and curricular decisions that encourage students to be engaged citizens equipped with knowledge and skills transferable to life outside of the school context. In addition to the CES model focusing on student-centered learning, La Prad noted that CES employs an array of different strategies that aim to enhance student engagement and learning outcomes. For example, the implementation of block scheduling, interdisciplinary teams, project-based learning, community service, internship opportunities, and the cultivation of a culture of inquiry were some of the strategies explored by the CES schools. The innovative thinking applied at the participating high schools in this study can be extended to middle and elementary schools. The approach is not only effective and meaningful for individual students academically, but it also creates a deeper sense of commitment as engaged citizens of their community.

An inherent aspect of an informed policy is that the policy must be backed by research. Barley and Beesley (2007) conducted a qualitative study with the objective of exploring and identifying the factors perceived by school personnel as contributing to the success of high-performing, high-needs (HPHN) rural schools. The findings from this research demonstrate ways HPHN rural schools found success that can potentially be replicated by other schools. By comparing and isolating the factors found predominantly in HP schools, the researchers were able to determine what factors could be attributed to their success.

Barley and Beesley (2007) agreed that school mergers, closures, and diminishing economic

stability in rural regions pose challenges to rural schools, notwithstanding their importance. Meanwhile, educators are under pressure to succeed despite limited resources, resulting in many rural schools becoming HNs. Principals in their study cited high standards, structural support for learning, student data utilization, and curriculum, teaching, and assessment alignment as keys to these schools' success. Additional factors included in the study were teacher retention, professional development, and the individualization of instruction. The first of these themes was community, emphasizing the central role a school plays in the community and the strong influence of investment and support from community members. The next identified theme was organizational support for effective instruction. This theme included practices such as alignment of curriculum and instruction, establishing clear goals, using data to inform instruction, and setting high expectations. The third theme was support for teachers. Support in the study was comprised of opportunities for collaboration, retention efforts, effective professional development, and encouraging personal connections between the teachers and their schools.

The second phase of the research conducted by Barley and Beesley (2007) consisted of findings and observations upon visiting select schools, which revealed several additional influential factors that contributed to school success. These additional factors observed by the researchers included parent involvement, a culture of care, an emphasis on extracurricular activities, and effective administrative leadership. Concepts such as professional development and retention, as well as structural supports for learning that were identified in phase one, were observed in phase two as well. The researchers indicate that further work is needed to identify the factors that lead to HPHN rural schools. However, these findings highlight the interconnectedness between the school and its community, the importance of high expectations and effective support for both students and teachers, and the influential role of supportive organizational structures and

leadership in fostering success in rural schools.

While Barley and Beesley (2007) provided insight into how to assist teachers in their success, Karnopp (2022) explores the fact that teachers themselves serve as a valuable asset in informing policy. Using structuration theory as a lens, this qualitative study examines the knowledge-building behaviors of educators in one rural school district, focusing specifically on science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) instructional practices. Structuration theory proposes that the structures of a social system share and are shaped by the actions of the individuals within that system. The study examines the ways educators' access and shared knowledge related to effective STEM instruction in the absence of formal structural support within their district. The survey invited all the educators in the district to participate in the 2019 study, which resulted in 125 online surveys and 18 participant interviews.

The findings from this research revealed several important avenues for adapting in an under-resourced rural school district. Karnopp (2022) explained the importance of educators' agency and structures that support social interaction in rural school districts, particularly if they are navigating change implementation. In the absence of robust formal support, educator agency was critical for establishing informal knowledge-building structures that supported knowledge sharing amongst teachers within the school district. The study showed that due to the lack of formal knowledge-building support opportunities provided by the district, educators relied on external resources. Educators utilized school routines as well as personal time as opportunities for knowledge-building interactions with colleagues. For example, without guidance from the district on the STEM curriculum, teachers would collaborate voluntarily to support one another with STEM instruction. All of the interview participants in the study attested to the importance of their interactions with colleagues.

The results of the research conducted by Karnopp (2022) demonstrated the fact that collaborative efforts led to new understandings and organizational learning in a real context. Despite limited support and resources, self-motivated teachers were shown to be driven by a personal interest in STEM and a desire to best serve their students. These teachers work collaboratively in solidarity towards a shared goal. However, they still faced barriers that limited their choices and opportunities to build knowledge. This research suggests that it would be useful for schools to specifically allocate time to facilitate valuable informal knowledge-building between colleagues. School leaders should leverage the intrinsic motivation that teachers contain by rallying them around shared goals for instruction, thereby enhancing organizational learning. Leaders must also address the existing barriers that hinder educator agency and knowledge-building opportunities, such as limited access to resources and an unclear understanding of initiatives. Further research should explore the factors motivating educator agency and the ways it is enacted within under-resourced districts. Karnopp contends that by understanding these dynamics, leadership can implement more informed strategies for promoting collaboration and professional development, as well as continuous learning in STEM instruction. This idea that teachers themselves are an asset and provide crucial support to their schools and communities was also reflected in the creation of the Literacy Academy, as discussed by O Connell (2023), demonstrating that this is not only applicable to STEM but across any subject.

Furthermore, Crumb et al.'s (2023) theoretical article explains the concept of rural cultural wealth and the importance of dismantling the deficit ideologies typically associated with rurality. As explained previously by Brenner (2023) and Azano and Biddle (2019), the pervasiveness of the deficit narratives associated with rurality prevents rural schools from accessing the resources they need. This exploration of cultural wealth as a theoretical framework

offers a profound shift away from deficit-oriented narratives toward asset-based perspectives.

Crumb et al. (2023) suggested that rural residents possess empowering transgressive knowledge that challenges dominant narratives, values marginalized perspectives, and promotes social justice and equity. The community cultural wealth¹⁴ that rural residents possess includes distinct types of capital, including aspirational, familial, resistant, and navigational capital. Aspirational capital refers to the ability to find hope in the face of adversity. Familial capital includes cultural knowledge that exists in kinship networks. Linguistic capital includes intellectual and social skills that are acquired through communication with others. Resistance capital is illustrated in one's ability to self-preserve, and navigational capital refers to one's ability to maneuver through social institutions (Crumb et al., 2023). In addition to community cultural capital, rural communities possess resourcefulness and ingenuity. This refers to the inventive and resourceful ways that rural communities are able to address their challenges, which exemplify their transgressive knowledge. Crumb et al. also noted that School-University Community Collaborations (SUCCs) also play an important role, as they engage rural youth in participatory action projects that represent practical applications of this transgressive knowledge by working collectively to find creative solutions rooted in local contexts. SUCCs involve students in research processes that value their local insights and challenge traditional approaches to education and community development. This approach brings to mind the sentiments shared by Azano and Biddle (2019) regarding the application of Freirean ideology, as the explanation of the rural cultural wealth framework shares many similarities with the concept of conscientização.

As mentioned by other scholars, Crumb et al. (2023) reaffirm the fact that rurality is not

¹⁴ Yosso (2006) defines community cultural wealth as a way of challenging traditional interpretations of cultural capital through the lens of critical race theory rather than a deficit perspective, which highlights the strengths and resources found in community environments.

only plagued by a deficit mindset but is also often defined on the basis of urban normativity. Further, Crumb et al. assert that defining rural as simply “not urban” implicates homogeneity across cultures and geographic locations simply because they all share rurality as a descriptor. Rural communities represent multiple cultures and diverse people and experiences, which often consist of small and close communities rich with connection, pride, history, and tradition. The communal identity is often suppressive of differences, indicating a need for rural schools and communities to address hegemonic power dynamics to move towards equity. These findings further acknowledge that it is necessary to resist deficit-oriented perspectives of rurality and, instead, work to enhance structural support for underserved rural students and their communities.

Additionally, Crumb et al. (2023) delved into both micro and macro-level concerns regarding challenges influencing education in rural contexts. Micro-level concerns involve localized issues like resource allocation within districts and unrealized biases among rural educators. Macro-level concerns relate to overarching structural challenges, such as funding disparities and teacher shortages, which impact rural education at a systemic level. Crumb et al. explain that by capitalizing on the assets of minoritized communities as strengths, individuals and, therefore, their communities can advance themselves. Culturally responsive adaptations to rural education can lead to long-term community prosperity.

Providing another avenue for informed policy, Biddle’s (2022) study examines how rural educators negotiate the tension between the principles of global education reform and the increasing need to address childhood adversity through the lens of critical rural theory. While Azano and Biddle (2019) express the difficulty in equipping students for a capitalist, neoliberal society they will inevitably enter while simultaneously promoting community sustainability and empowering students to change that society through a liberatory educational lens, Biddle (2022)

explores the use of critical rural theory to manage this paradox. Critical rural theory is a framework that uses a critical perspective to challenge conventional understandings of rurality and uncover the underlying power dynamics, inequalities, and structural factors that shape diverse rural experiences. The framework seeks to inform more equitable and more inclusive strategies for the development of rural communities and advocates for rural community empowerment. This perspective seeks to decenter urbanization as the assumed trajectory for society to make other socio-spatial arrangements more visible and give better consideration to their complexities. It draws on the implicit assumptions in policy that have negative impacts on rural students. It makes it possible to better understand the lived experiences of students and educators in rural areas using an intersectional approach.

Biddle (2022) conducted a qualitative study that aims to explore the “imaginaries” of rural educators regarding holistic education and to identify the supports that they believe to be necessary to meet the diverse needs of their students. In this context, imaginaries refer to the collective visions, dreams, and aspirations held by rural educators regarding their ideas about an ideal state of education for their students. The study was conducted in 2016 and 2017 in rural Maine. Participants included a focus group of rural educators and administrative staff from various schools ranging from grades K-12 across different subjects.

The findings procured by Biddle (2022) pertaining to the perception of the existing education reforms showed that rural teachers reported heightened academic expectations alongside diminishing resources, particularly noting a lack of support for non-academic needs caused by economic insecurity. The need for adequate human resources to meet high expectations, the importance of community support, and the desire for a teaching model that recognizes cultural and place-based approaches were common themes. When faced with the challenge of meeting high

expectations without sufficient resources and support, ethical dilemmas arose. Some teachers reported engaging in acts of civil disobedience, such as disregarding certain policies and adopting inclusive practices, as a result. Collective resistance at the school level was also reported, fueled by a family-like school culture. Another form of resistance reported by teachers was their refusal to abide by hands-off policies, admitting that they regularly hugged students despite this not being allowed. Furthermore, teachers discussed their legal responsibilities as mandated reporters, stating that they felt the process often perpetuated more harm to local families than help. Instead, many teachers expressed the belief that parents should be supported and educated through the school. Furthermore, Biddle (2022) expressed that teachers and staff talked about the importance of using inclusive language to describe diverse family structures, the fact that many kept food and clothes in their classroom, as well as the fact that many also kept toiletries if a student needed them. Teachers also emphasized the importance of broader community support, including access to health services and parenting classes, and advocated for a culturally responsive and place-based approach to teaching and learning.

Informed policy should not just apply to academic decisions. Schools can and should provide a plethora of resources for the overall health and well-being of students. In addition to outlining the issues associated with rural mental health access, Nichols et al. (2017) provide suggestions for resolving the issue of mental health among rural students. Their qualitative research data demonstrates the fact that collaboration between educators and specialized support personnel (SSP) is critical to ensuring that students receive social-emotional support to benefit their development and increase their learning. School-based mental health programs in rural schools improve students' mental health symptoms as well as their academic performance.

Nichols et al.'s (2017) findings also demonstrated the fact that between 70 and 80% of

rural youth receiving mental health services at all are receiving those services through their school. Because of this, they contend that it is important that the limited collaboration that occurs between SSP staff is made more effective by more clearly delineating their roles and by providing specific goals for each staff member so that they may all work together to provide cohesive and comprehensive care. Additionally, it was evident that professional learning community (PLC) collaborative time should be purposeful. The solution of supplementing support with external private mental health practitioners may result in additional support. However, cohesion was found to be lost, and collaboration is difficult. They suggest that perhaps, rather than turning to private solutions, public solutions should be expanded. The scholars state that more research is needed to fully understand the best-practice approaches to how school personnel can best facilitate mental health support in rural schools.

Conclusively, the research indicates the importance of a strength-based approach when addressing the challenges associated with rural education. By acknowledging the needs as well as the assets that exist in rural communities, policymakers can make more informed decisions regarding rural education. Implementing place-based pedagogies, encouraging the existing ties between schools and their communities, and advocating for policy change using critical analysis will allow for more equitable conditions. Informed, critical, and informed pedagogical and policy approaches provide promising pathways that lead to the vitality of rural schools as they develop.

Chapter 4: Discussion

It is imperative to be realistic about the issues faced in rural schools without viewing rural communities through a deficit lens. The literature generally agrees that there is no universal definition of rurality, which presents challenges for research and discovery. Perhaps it is less important to fixate on what is or is not rural in a strict sense and instead ensure that all schools in all areas have their needs met, considering the fact that their geographic location can negatively influence a school's ability to access necessary resources.

The insights from the literature have significant implications for practical application in improving rural education. Educators and policymakers must prioritize equity and inclusivity in policy decisions and pedagogical approaches. This involves understanding the importance of community, advocating for increased funding and resources for rural schools, as well as implementing critical pedagogy and culturally sustaining teaching practices that honor the diverse experiences of rural students.

The importance of community involvement cannot be overstated. Communities serve as vital hubs for cooperation, cultural preservation, and provide critical support for rural education programs. Educators and policymakers can create a supportive ecosystem that nurtures student success by fostering the existing connections between schools, families, and local organizations. Therefore, any effective policy approach must center on community engagement and empowerment.

Additionally, innovative and relevant pedagogy can result in improvements to rural education by providing educational opportunities that resonate with the lived experiences and traditions of rural communities. Culturally sensitive curriculum development, fair resource allocation, teacher recruitment and retention initiatives, and community-centered and critical

place-based policy development are crucial when creating policy proposals designed to address the systemic issues affecting rural education. Place-based education initiatives offer promising avenues for engaging students in meaningful learning experiences that are rooted in their local contexts. These initiatives and approaches can serve as an alternative to traditional neoliberal policies that reproduce the challenges found in rural communities.

Specifically, Schafft (2016) warns against one-size-fits-all neoliberal policies focused solely on creating more human capital and instead implements policies that cultivate a learning environment that teaches students applicable knowledge and skills in addition to focusing on social and civic aspects of education. Prioritizing efficiency over equity is inefficient in the long run, and the shortcomings of students' K-12 education lead to subsequent issues with the communities they belong to. This sentiment should be applied to some of the well-intentioned older material, such as the suggestion by Miller (1995) to focus on school-based enterprise programs if these programs are not carefully centered around community self-determination rather than an outside savior or dedication to global capitalist endeavors.

As we look to the future, it is imperative that stakeholders at all levels—educators, policymakers, community leaders, and researchers—work together to address the systemic challenges facing rural education. This requires a commitment to ongoing collaboration, dialogue, and action. By centering the voices and experiences of rural students and communities, we can create more equitable and inclusive educational systems that provide all students with the opportunity to thrive.

4.1 Limitations

While the literature has valuable insights, it is important to acknowledge its limitations, namely the relative lack of research on the topic *The Rural Educator*, as mentioned at the beginning of this thesis, contains a significant amount of the literature, which could be considered a limiting factor. Similarly, a significant amount of the research was conducted by a small set of researchers (i.e., Azano, Biddle, Tieken, and Schafft). These limitations demonstrate the specific need for future research and a broader range of research and publications beyond what is published in *The Rural Educator*.

According to the existing literature, future research should strive to incorporate diverse perspectives and methodologies to ensure a more comprehensive understanding of rural education. Additional longitudinal studies are needed to assess the long-term impact of policy interventions and pedagogical approaches on student outcomes as well as community development. Johnson et al. (2021) concluded that without longitudinal data, not much is currently understood pertaining to the way students in rural schools grow academically during elementary school at all, let alone in response to specific interventions or policy changes. Overall, there is an insufficient amount of peer-reviewed research on rural schools across the United States.

Despite these challenges, the findings from the literature review offer hope and inspiration for the future of rural education. By building on rural communities' strengths and prioritizing equity and inclusivity, we can create a brighter future for all students, regardless of where they live.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

Historically and contemporarily, rural education has encountered a plethora of unique challenges. The needs of rural education are multifaceted and require a nuanced understanding of the unique contexts in which these diverse schools operate. Through examining the historical development, current issues, and particular conditions of rural education throughout this investigation, it is evident that a diversified approach is required as we explore possible futures.

Moving forward, pedagogical and policy approaches must reflect the diverse needs of rural learners. Collaboration among educators, policymakers, community members, and other stakeholders is paramount to implementing these approaches effectively. By advocating for effective change that prioritizes educational equity and empowers rural communities, we can create a future in which every child has access to quality education, regardless of their geographic location, and in which rural communities can empower themselves through the transformative power of education.

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