Discourses of the Rural Rust Belt: Schooling, Poverty, and Rurality

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This article addresses the ways in which elementary teachers in the rural rust belt both reproduce and contest dominant discourses of schooling, rurality, and poverty in their particular local context. Situated within a 4-year postcritical ethnographic study, this analysis of teacher discourse took part during an embedded, 4-month-long teacher study group. Within this context, the authors examine how the group's discourse on poverty claimed that inequity was the fault of those experiencing it, as well as that a neoliberal discourse of education emphasized a flattened accountability and growth-only perspective within teacher's professional interactions. However, through the addition of a spatial lens, they also situate these discourses within a particular rural and rust-belt context. This article teases apart the discursive threads within two teacher study groups, revealing the construction by teachers of their own rural, high-poverty communities as deficient, as well as exploring the complexities of the intersections of these discourses for teachers working in such settings. Their analysis contributes to a more robust understanding of the particular intersecting discourses currently circulating and producing a White-majority, high-poverty rural rust belt where children go to school and are taught by educators with their own complex orientations to schooling, rurality, and poverty.

Keywords: **critical discourse analysis, rurality, poverty, teacher talk, education, postcritical ethnography**

Pervasive stories coming from the media (Porter, 2018) as well as from popular literature (Vance, 2016) and academic research (Biddle & Azano, 2016) about rural and/or rust-belt locales across the Midwest and Appalachian South construct these geographies in terms of deficitized narratives of high poverty and White majority. In part, this has to do with racist and colonialist histories, political rhetoric, and the challenges across the United States where voting, geography, and race are particularly complex and divisive (Pew Research Center, 2018). This is also complicated by the entangled and complex histories of Whiteness across rural places in the United States (Isenberg, 2017). Over a 4-year postcritical ethnographic study (Noblit, Flores, & Murillo, 2004) in the midwestern rural rust belt community of Stewartsville (pop. 23,000; note that all names of places and people are pseudonyms per institutional review board approval document), Alex, the lead author, collaborated with and worked alongside educators, students, and community organizers. In this work, she found that deconstructing dominant rural rust-belt narratives requires iterative exploration of discourses (e.g., talk, text, policy, interaction) that produce the contemporary rural rust belt of the early 21st century. In this article, we use critical discourse analysis framing (Gee, 1999; Rogers, 2004, 2017) to examine how educators both made sense of and located themselves within dominant narratives of schooling, poverty, and rurality.

Overview of Related Literature

People make sense of and construct discourses of schooling that are filtered through publicly

produced and circulated orientations to poverty found in policy, in academic and popular literature, and in interactions in and out of schools (Gorski, 2014; Rogers, 2004, 2017; Shannon, 2014). Such discourse is also part of a complex web that intersects with geographic locales and how such geographic locales are experienced and produced in terms of their economic status and other sociodemographic markers (e.g., race, ethnicity, and educational attainment). In addition, low socioeconomic status, alongside geographic isolation (e.g., rural trailer parks, ghetto neighborhoods), has profound effects on the educational outcomes and long-term opportunities for children growing up in geographically or racially isolating and low socioeconomic contexts (Green & Corbett, 2013; Thomson, 2007; Wilson, 2009). In such contexts, working-class public schools hold the possibility of constructing models of education that perpetuate and reify inequities rather than position children as transformative agents (Finn, 2013).

Yet, it is also important to recognize that schools comprise educators and staff who are tied tightly to the geographic context in which they work and live. In addition, "somewhere along the way, rural students and adults alike seem to have learned that to be rural is to be sub-par, that the condition of living in a rural locale creates deficiencies of various kinds—an educational deficiency in particular" (Theobald & Wood, 2010, p. 17). The challenge, it seems, is that as children experience schooling in racially isolated and high-poverty rural places in ways that position them as deficient, educators grapple with a complex set of discourses that they reproduce and reify as members of those same rural locales. Therefore, we suggest that the application of a critical geographic lens is essential in uncovering how spatial relationships are part of contemporary social, economic, and educational discourses (Rowe, 2015).

In this article, we frame educational inequities in the broader rural midwestern context in which industry abandonment and population decline affect the local availability of educational resources and personnel (Jimerson, 2005; Panos, 2017; Seelig, 2017)—including educator shortages in the right-to-work state where Stewartsville is located. We also acknowledge that teachers might contribute to such stories of damage (Tuck, 2009) while working hard within rural locales to educate children. Within this context, we offer one story among many possible stories drawn from a 4-month teacher study group during the 2014–2015 school year, facilitated at the teachers' request, that explores how these educators talk about and make sense of poverty and education in their work in the rural rust belt. Here, we examine broadly circulating orientations to people in poverty that position inequity as the fault of those experiencing it (Gorski, 2017), as well as the neoliberal discourse of education that emphasizes a flattened accountability and growth-only perspective (Edmonson & Butler, 2010) within teacher's professional interactions. However, we seek to also situate or place (Prinsloo, 2005) these discourses within a particular rural and rust-belt context in Stewartsville.

Part of the challenge of understanding teachers' positioning of discourses of poverty and economic hardship, as well as of education in the current policy climate, is that these are often placeless discourses that have little to do with the material implications of working, teaching, and learning in a rural or, more specifically, a rural rust-belt locale. The intersection of the local, rural postindustrial context with educational testing and accountability speaks to the standardization of outcomes and expectations even though inequitable allocation of resources and conditions remains prevalent in contemporary educational policy. Dominant educational discourses of standardization and accountability constrain teacher talk within group settings, backgrounding situated or specific pedagogical discourses in favor of a focus on placeless individual relationships with children (Comber & Nixon, 2009). In fact, it is important to remember that urban educational research has grappled with the difficulties of standardization, or *placelessness*, of outcomes across school districts differentiated by space, race, and class (e.g., Anyon, 1981; Lareau, 2003; Rowe, 2015; Vincent & Ball, 2007). However, despite a rich body of research on poverty in rural America (initiated in the modern era by President Johnson's 1965 "War on Poverty"), there continues to be only a modest focus on poverty and rurality in education research (e.g.,

Howley & Howley, 2010; Howley, Howley, & Johnson, 2014; Sherman & Sage, 2011).

Previous discourse studies of teacher study groups or teacher meetings over time advocate for an ethnographic grounding to critical discursive findings (Comber & Nixon, 2009; Lewis & Ketter, 2004). In addition, prior discursive analyses borne out of larger ethnographic projects have found value in applying a specific discursive frame to chunks, or temporally delineated data, drawn from text-mediated discussion to illuminate particularly political, complex, or challenging discourses such as those around race, ethnicity, migration, accountability, and identity (Honan, Knobel, Baker, & Davies, 2000; Lewis & Tierney, 2013). Thus, in the present article we offer an analysis of a discussion that occurred within a 4-month-long teacher study group centered reading a peer-reviewed academic text hyperfocused on the intersections of teaching students living in postindustrial, high-poverty places.

Context of the Study and this Story

In a town that is 97% White, with only 8% of residents holding postsecondary degrees, where almost 24% of the population, and 33% of children, exist below the poverty line (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016), probing the dominant, placeless discourses of poverty and schooling in a teacher- and researcher-led study group offers the potential for better understanding the production of schooling in the rural rust belt in the 2010s. Situating, or placing, teacher talk addresses the growing need of educational ethnographies to contribute to the political work of education and education research today (Anders, 2012; Lester, Anders, & Mariner, 2018).

According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2016), Stewart County and Stewartsville, its county seat, are classified as rural, yet despite dominant conceptions of rurality, the economy is not dependent on agriculture. Rather, automotive manufacturing has historically led the town's economy since the late 19th century, and as with many rust-belt towns and cities, it has not proven a stable source of capital and employment. Across the United States, recent unemployment numbers and the uptick in the stock market indicate that the national economy has generally recovered; however, in Stewart County unemployment has been higher than the national average since 1990. In late 2018, Stewart County had an unemployment rate of 5.1%, though its highest annual unemployment rate peaked at 15.2% in 2009, not long after the closing of its largest manufacturing employer. During the 2014–2015 school year (when data in this study were collected), 21% of the total population was at or below poverty, while another 24% struggled to remain between 100% and 200% of the poverty level. Residents of Stewartsville proper experience even higher levels of poverty, with 23.5% of the population living under the poverty line and 33% of children living in poverty. These statistics are reflected in the makeup of Morningside Elementary, where 71% of students qualify for the federal free and reduced-price lunch program. These numbers remain very similar as of this publication. (Statistics drawn from US Census Bureau, US Labor Bureau, and state department of education cited this way to maintain anonymity of the research site.)

Stewartsville, at the time of this study and into the present, is a place of economic insecurity and high rates of unemployment. The local newspaper continues to report on the fate of the old automotive plant, whose steady but dramatic closing meant jobs were reduced from 3,400 to 0 in the space of 10 years. While the local school district conducts regular home visits, sends students home with backpacks full of food and toiletries, and provides an optional breakfast program for all children, the plant's closure drastically cut the local tax base; thus, educators, community organizers, and the lead author, Alex, continued to find ways to create a web of safety net resources for families, as well as educate school district staff on schooling for equity in high-poverty contexts (Panos, 2018). A school-developed survey indicated that almost 90% of students' families felt welcome in the school and in their child's classroom, and that they found services and events for families informative and helpful. Overall, families viewed the school as a welcoming and supportive place.

Methodological and Theoretical Orientations

Postcritical Ethnography

This article uses a postcritical ethnographic methodology that highlights the responsibility and

ethics the researcher owes to communities on and through which research is conducted, to move beyond single stories of people and places (Anders & Lester, 2015; Noblit et al., 2004). Together, we as authors and researchers work here to examine the complex discourses that represent and are produced by people and (rural-rust belt) places, in order to trouble (Lather, 2008; Lather & Smithies, 1997) and layer incomplete stories (Noblit et al., 2004) about places and how they come to be known (Basso, 1996; de Certeau, 1984). As such, from a methodological stance, the ethnographic approach to understanding a rural place and schooling, and the discursive approach to understanding circulating stories are interconnected.

Discourse

In this article, *discourse* is understood to be "systematic clusters of themes, statements, ideas, and ideologies that come into play" (Luke, 2000, p. 10). We utilize a critical discourse analysis approach (Gee, 1999; Luke, 2000; Rogers, 2004, 2017) because it offers a framework through which to understand the contextual, or placed, nature of discourse. In addition, critical discourse analysis positions discourse as a process of production and reproduction moving within, through, and across text, talk, policy, and media at particular sites or moments of interaction (Scollon, 2001). In addition, a discursive framing of text-based discussion engages the process of production and reproduction of what might be considered public or "dominant" discourses and just how those are produced in turn by teachers within a professional context. These moments where dominant discourses do come into play, and how we arrive at these discussions (e.g., in a researcher-directed reading of a peer-reviewed article), not only inform how teachers might construct the intersections of schooling, poverty, and rurality but also trouble the ways researchers represent (Noblit et al., 2004) and produce knowledge about teaching within a local context (Panos, 2018). Essentially, in this article we examine the intersection of dominant, or public, discourse with placed discourse in the form of both academic literature and teacher talk within the context of a professional development discussion.

Rural Places

Geographic delineations and sociospatial boundaries may appear unchangeable, yet in reality both are malleable in specific ways. For example, while *rural* may be statistically defined in relation to the size of a population or its proximity to a city, conceptually it comprises meanings carried out by inhabitants and relates to one's identity, perspectives, and orientations to the world (Rowe, 2015; Seelig, 2017; Tieken, 2014). In addition, *place* is more than a geographic identifier; it is "an articulation of social relations and cultural and political practices that are paradoxical, provisional, and constantly in the process of becoming" (Schafft & Jackson, 2010, p. 11). Places are fundamentally shaped by dominant political, economic, social, and cultural practices that occur in the material experiences of the inhabitant and are imposed by these larger structures and ideologies, such as global capitalism and urban-centric discourses.

The discourses of urbanity and rurality are essentialist, yet these discourses influence problem definitions, resource allocations, and educational policy decisions. In a comparative framing, urban spaces are symbols of progress, diversity, and technology; they are hubs of activity and communication, places filled with meaning through the sheer number of people inhabiting them. Certainly, negative stereotypes and discourses plague urban centers and shape educational policies, particularly for racially, linguistically, and politically marginalized populations in the urban core (see Anyon, 1997; Lipman, 2011; Warren & Mapp, 2011). Rural spaces are represented as romantic and idyllic and pictured as a small farming community or, conversely, in a pathological interpretation of rural residents as "cousin marrying" (Theobald & Wood, 2010, p. 30) and ignorant. Since places are socially constructed through people's everyday lives and larger economic, social, cultural, and political forces (Harvey, 2006; Smith, 2008), they cannot be considered neutral or unproblematic in educational discourse. In this article, we suggest that, if places are ignored altogether, not only are students' identities being dismissed, but schooling also becomes complicit in the political and social arrangements that give rise to spatial and social inequities.

Methods

To trouble the construction of rural, high-poverty communities as educationally and culturally deficient, our study illuminates the struggles of a small midwestern town in the throes of industrial abandonment. As part of a larger multiyear research project utilizing ethnographic tools and perspectives that consider rurality as integral to the project (Corbett, 2015; Green & Bloome, 1997), this article explores a 4-month public elementary teacher study group, taken from the larger 4-year study. Iterative analysis across the study alongside member checking revealed broader discourses of rural life, poverty, and the constraints of contemporary educational policies as significant forces impacting these teachers' professional and personal lives. Over 40 hours of fieldwork, historical and document analysis, and informal and semi-structured interviews led to the formation of the 4-month-long teacher-requested study groups related to specific challenges (e.g., pedagogical, place based) facing teachers in this community.

The study groups were facilitated by Alex, as requested, and took place in two monthly, 1-hour sessions (one for K-2, another for grade 3–6 classroom teachers) from January to April 2015 using a teacher study group model (Lewison, 1995), in which teachers gathered after school to discuss a piece of media or text on a topic codetermined by the researcher and participants. While every classroom teacher in the school participated voluntarily, in addition to both special education teachers and the library/media specialist (19 teachers total), they did not all participate in every session.

Data Sources

We worked iteratively with data from across the study; however, the data sources we highlight here are two approximately 45-minute audio recordings developed into transcripts (Ochs, 1979) from final study group sessions of the K-2 group (four teachers) and the grade 3–6 group (nine teachers) in which teachers were prompted into discussion through a researcher-initiated reading. In addition, the peer-reviewed article discussed in this session (Comber, 2015) is considered data that the researcher and teachers "thought with" (Jackson &

Mazzei, 2011) and was analyzed for specific text references in the transcript that resonated for the teachers and through which they generated meaning. We also include governmental statistics from the U.S. Census Bureau, the American Community Survey, and the State Department of Education to situate the context of our study. Both the government statistics and document analysis provide representations of common discourses of schooling, poverty, and rurality that frame the local context in which these teachers live and work.

Analysis and Reporting

Across the study, teachers voiced their anxieties about the intersections of mandated testing, the poverty in the community and among their students, and the isolation students experienced because of their rural community. Comber and Nixon (2009) found that dominant educational discourses of standardization and accountability have been shown to constrain teacher talk within group settings, backgrounding pedagogical discourses in favor of a focus on relationships. Thus, Alex worked with teachers using the study group model to explore discourses and issues that continually arose across her fieldwork and study group sessions. After collecting data, Jenny (the second author) joined in the analytic process, given her expertise in rural education and related policy discourses.

This study foregrounds data from meetings where teachers discussed an article from the *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy* (Comber, 2015) that explicitly addresses social justice, poverty, and place. To examine the way language-in-use "both creates and reflects the contexts in which it is used" (Gee, 1999, p. 80), we engaged critical discourse analysis (Gee, 1999; Rogers, 2004, 2017) and incorporated specific discursive tools of inquiry (Gee, 1999; Greckhamer & Cilesiz, 2014). Our critical discourse analysis approach foregrounded the "constitutive relationship between discourse and the social world" (Rogers, 2004, p. 1) in which discourse can never be truly bounded (Gee, 1999). We analyzed these discursive building blocks to better understand the ways teachers localize the intersections of broader discourses of schooling, poverty, and rurality.

We followed steps to discourse analysis laid out by Lester and Paulus (2011) through (a) repeated readings of transcripts; (b) selection, organization, and identification of patterns—ours based on discursive building steps (e.g., political, knowledge, identity; Gee, 1999; Greckhamer & Cilesiz, 2014); (c) generation of explanations; (d) noting variability; and (e) reflexive and transparent documentation of our claims. The transcripts were developed by the researcher present at the teacher study groups.

We drew on Greckhamer and Cilesiz (2014), to develop a shared analytic tool in the form of Google Sheets spreadsheets that included the full transcript of the source and columns for each of seven discourse building blocks (Significance, Activity, Identity, Connection, Relationship, Political, Sign System/Knowledge). This tool was used for independent analysis and to develop shared explanations and definitions of the blocks within the transcript using the commenting, highlighting, and suggesting features on Google. This tool also supported identifying key passages to both support and disconfirm our evolving analysis.

After eight months of regularly scheduled video-based meetings and phone conversations in addition to use of the commenting feature on shared Google documents and e-mail, we began to reflexively construct a written report of our findings, continuing to meet, comment on, and question our reporting tools (Greckhamer & Cilesiz, 2014) and language. As a regular part of our analysis we probed our roles as researchers—for Alex as a participant in the data, and for Jenny as data outsider. In addition, following the construction of the findings, the lead researcher shared findings with participants, which led to additional collaboration and work on schooling, place, and poverty (Panos, 2017, 2018).

Positionalities and Limitations

As researchers we are both White women who have conducted long-term ethnographic research in rural contexts. Alex worked continually with the community under study for more than four years; however, she did not grow up or teach in a rural locale. Jenny taught in rural schools in a region near Stewartsville. We recognize that this analysis is a coproduction of complex identities that span researcher/researched and insider/outsider (Villenas, 1996), with particular implications from spatial and racial perspectives, given that all participants and researchers are White.

What is missing from this study is the complexity of Whiteness and materiality in White-majority rural places. Here we do not fully attend to the complex production of Whiteness and its classed distinctions (Wray, 2006) in the ways White educated educators (all of whom hold bachelor's degrees and many of whom hold multiple graduate degrees and certifications) position their White students and families who have long family histories of, as teachers put it, "working the line." In addition, the emphasis on spatial influence (homes, schools) and the particularities of a rural rust-belt locale are material and have complex histories and presents that this article does not fully address.

Findings

In the following sections we offer descriptions of dominant discourses of education, poverty, and rurality that emerged throughout the 4-year ethnographic study. The following transcript sections are drawn specifically from the study group data to illustrate the ways teachers were complicit in the reproduction of these dominant, and often deficit-based, discourses. Yet, the place-specific orientation of these discussions positions teacher's productions of dominant discourses as particularly important to understand schooling in the rural rust belt. We have found that teachers construct their worlds spatially (Leander, Phillips, & Taylor, 2010)—through situating discourses of education as connections between the state, the home, and the school; through the ways childhood poverty impacts classroom spaces; and in terms of their particular rural identity. For example, in the following passage, Emily (all names are pseudonyms) reiterates a dominant discourse of Stewartsville and her students, one that mimics current media representations (Maisano, 2017):

Well, like for me, I live in Postertown. I don't know a whole lot about Stewartsville. And, the perception that people have of Stewartsville,

even from Postertown, is that they're drug addicts, 'cause that's what they hear on the news. (Right). So I have people ask, how's this affecting your kids.

Situated within her talk are discourses about preconceived notions of schooling in Stewartsville, the specific role poverty plays in the community, and a differentiation between rural spaces (Postertown/Stewartsville). She directly addresses the notion of perception of Stewartsville as an outside force, one that she herself is subject to as an outsider from Postertown (another rural community less than 10 miles away). Emily positions the circulating discourses within news media that indict people connected to Stewartsville as directly connected to children going to school in town. The connection between the news and the drug addicts and the lingering question of "how's this affecting your kids" indicates the significance these stories have for the work teachers do in schools, just how deficitized stories of poverty and drug addiction are, and how complex the rural landscape can be for people living within it—even within 10 miles of one another. This also positions Emily as an ignorant outsider, even while she teaches children in a place where they are growing up with these stories about their own deep connections to poverty, drugs, and a rural town in decline.

In each of the following sections, in tables we offer short selections from transcript excerpts we highlight in this article and our collaboratively developed findings. Full transcript excerpts in each of the tables are reprinted in Appendixes A–C.

Schooling

Dominant educational discourses of standardization and accountability require teachers to produce results (i.e., students) through a standardized process despite differential inputs and outcomes. Across the teacher study groups educational and economic realities are constructed as a lack of professional control by teachers in their work environment. On one hand, teachers spoke directly of these structural constraints on their ability to educate young children and their relationship to the increase in local poverty. On the other hand, they reacted to the confinements of a test-based curriculum by indicating how it prevents them from addressing what they see as the more important pressing needs of their students, namely, food, clothing, emotional support, and basic skills development.

Perhaps most notable are the ways in which resources, the role of the school, and the role of the home are all developed comparatively, and often in opposition to one another (Table 1). Arianne begins and ends this section of the transcript through constructing resources in connection with other places: first with other schools in other school systems (she references schools in well-known affluent suburban centers) and then in terms of resources found, or not, in the home. For example,

Table 1

Selection From Transcript Excerpt of a Final Study Group Session: Schooling

Turn	Speaker	Talk
1	Arianne	But when we're talking about what we have to work with when the students come in, it almost doesn't matter how much you have. Because if they have no resources at home, when they're six, there's not much else we can do.
2	Elaine	And the things resource being here.
3	Arianne	Exactly.
4	Megan	And no support, nothing, no, they come with no background knowledge, nothing. And it isn't ever, increased. And you know. There is nothing for us to build upon even.
5	Elaine	We got some research at our kindergarten meeting, I don't know if we shared it with you yet, guys. But it showed, like, um, where kids come in, the last several years, and it's continued to go do:wn.[a]

Note.
[a]Transcriptions reflect Jeffersonian light notations (e.g., : = extended syllables; Ochs, 1979).

Arianne says, "Because if they have no resources at home, when they're six, there's not much else we can do." In each of these instances the Morningside School's resources are constructed in terms of other places. Initially, resources are "about the same" as other schools when understood through the context of the "low income families" the school system "has" (see Appendix A). By the end of this segment of the transcript, the resources are "better than some other schools . . . in terms of personnel"—schools that are in rural areas and in close geographic proximity.

Teachers construct the concept of school-based resources in multiple ways: as materials ("things being the resource here"), cleanliness, home-based support, background knowledge, access, student actions, and school personnel. These materials (pencil, glue, scissors, letters) are constructed in spatial comparisons between home and school, where home space is equated to a lack of resources, support, and background knowledge. For example, the children cannot recognize letters or numbers; they have never held a pair of scissors, nor do they know how to hold a pencil. These forms of knowledge are required for school spaces, but these school-based artifacts (Pahl & Rowsell, 2010) lose their usefulness in teaching and learning when "there is nothing for us to build upon even" (Table 1). This metaphor of building as the role of teaching/schooling is connected to a growth mind-set discourse (Gorski, 2017) that reflects a deficit perspective of low-income families and does not recognize the resources and knowledge these families do have at home.

Also present in teachers' discourse was worry about their own roles in education today. Arianne states that "because we have to worry about how they're gonna score on that test," they can't focus on teaching what Megan calls "traits like honesty and grit" like they did when she first started teaching. Teachers even express lack of control over the structure of the school day, when the tests fall during the year, and how to make up school after snow days and 2-hour weather delays. The teachers constructed the relationship between rurality, poverty, and education as one they operated within but did not have control over. These resources are framed quite differently in terms of a reference to a state-sanctioned text: "We got some research at our kindergarten meeting" (Table 1). This text supports teachers' analysis of their students' background knowledge and access to resources, serving as evidence of their own challenges in "building on"* as teaching. Rather than fully leverage their shared frustrations with the state based on its impacts on their work and on students' learning opportunities, they chose instead to construct state texts as evidence that their students "continue to go down"* over time. Another layer comes from the opening statement that lumps teachers in with their own students: "What we have to work with" and that it "almost doesn't matter how much you have" (Table 1). Students are constructed as lacking resources, but teachers also construct students as the key resource for the work of teaching. Yet, by their own standards and by those of the state, these resources (read: students) are not enough to do their jobs in this era of accountability and systemic poverty and in this isolated rural place.

Perhaps surprisingly, a neoliberal discourse of education (Edmonson & Butler, 2010) is not as prevalent in these discussions, as was originally expected. Teachers construct a deficit perspective (Gorski, 2017; Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992) of the families and students who live in poverty, and their social and cultural knowledges go unrecognized by the teachers. In this way, teachers adhere to the ahistoricizing and decontextualized aspects of neoliberalism, yet the material elements of neoliberal educational policies—competition, accountability, and standardization—appear substantially less across their discussions. The only time a neoliberal discourse surfaced was when the groups shared a brief exchange about how everyone is doing that week. For example, the K-2 conversation begins with discussion of testing. In addition, one teacher brings up resources and comparative advantages and disadvantages the school has in terms of their neighbors and other schools in the state. However, teachers do seamlessly adhere to a conservative (Shannon, 2014) emphasis on the need for student character development tied to a morality appraisal of families who live in poverty. For example, teachers argued that school should teach "the things that instill that ambition, and broaden their world . . . character

building"* because it is missing from home. This emphasis takes precedence over academic development and shifts the role of the teacher and school to provider of emotional support and social work, even while admonishing families for not doing enough.

Poverty

While teachers at Morningside recognize the multiple functions that the school fills for their students (Lisa states that they do more for the students "as a school corporation," such as feeding them; see Appendix B), they also reconstitute societal judgments that frame student home lives and support networks. Interestingly, the teachers' negative judgments are reserved for the parents and families but are not extended to their students. For example, Tori says, "And I mean, every classroom has it's little sunshine, but (laughter) . . . They're good kids. And, yeah. . . . you appreciate them for being the way they are, you know what I mean?"* The construction of judgmental discourses of poverty plays a critical role in perpetuating cycles of educational marginalization or disengagement and can influence students' educational trajectories (Sherman & Sage, 2011). Discourses of poverty in the form of attitudes and stereotypes, such as those espoused by Ruby Payne (2005), reify judgments and stereotypes about people living in poverty on the grounds of their disinterest in education, laziness, substance abuse, linguistic deficiencies, and inattentiveness as parents (Gorski, 2017). These poverty discourses construct students as victims of their upbringing.

There is no denying that children growing up in poverty struggle with its impacts, and the children in Stewartsville are no exception. When constructing the poverty experienced by their students, teachers are speaking to the challenges students face: family incarceration, hunger, and health and mental health problems. In many ways, teachers are identifying what Sennett and Cobb (1993) call the "hidden injuries of class," which the teachers understand their children will carry with them throughout their lives.

As can be seen in Table 2, teachers pull forward some of the major impacts that poverty can have on children and on teacher's work through their invocation of the many places that poverty reigns, and their strong relationships to one another: home ("where you'll sleep tonight"); school ("you can't learn"); jail ("my brother's in jail again"). In doing so, they construct low-income family life as negatively impacting children's schooling. Ann begins with stating the impacts of poverty on children's lives in the classroom in saying "you can't learn when you're thinkin' about what you saw last night, or: where you'll sleep tonight." She orients to student identity as both home- and school-based, identities that are woven together in classrooms. This fits with the literature on the impacts of poverty on schooling (Gorski, 2012), and her colleagues quickly follow where she has led by immediately listing off a series of these impacts as a coherent argument of what students face outside of school ("kids get the brute of it"). This was rapid-fire speech, each teacher building on the next, repeating the "or" Ann began with: "or where you'll sleep tonight." This list is swiftly cut short, however, with Kristine's quick "responsible?" in response to the proposition that brothers and sisters are also "in jail." This offers an alternative frame of home lives as challenging places by constructing brothers and sisters (other children, possibly) as competent and positive actors in the home space. It also constructs teachers' relationships as including both disagreement and agreement about children's home lives and the impacts of poverty. Ann's disagreement with Kristine cuts off the tail end of the word *responsible*, signaling disagreement. Ann's rhetorical question prompts laughter from many of the teachers, further indicating that this list of evidence of the impacts of poverty rings true, and establishes a sense of camaraderie, if also perhaps exhaustion. This analysis is supported by Lisa's response: we can't be exhausted ("It's not an excuse") and essentially separates home and school life: student lives outside of school cannot change how teachers do their jobs.

Within the study groups, discourses of poverty constructed schooling, and the work of teaching, as separate from children's home lives, and in so doing separates the impacts of poverty (the evidence of impacts listed) from their work in the classroom. Ann, however, does not build on this: "It's just what we deal with. It's what we deal with, yeah. It's what

Table 2

Selection From Transcript Excerpt of a Final Study Group Session: Poverty

Turn	Speaker	Talk
1	Ann	[you can't learn when you're thinkin' about what you saw last night, or:[a] where you'll sleep tonight.
2	Kristine	Right, and when their parents are either depressed or they're anxious, and then the kids get the brute of it.
3	Lottie	[or they're drunk. But how many of our kids now have parents who're addicts? Or in jail, or recovering, if not, dead!
4	Ann	Or brothers or sisters that are
5	Kristine	=responsible?
6	Ann	[in jail! I mean that's just, my brother's in jail again! We:ll:, what else do you got? (laughter)
7	Lisa	It's not an excuse for us not doing stuff, I just think we need. I mean.
8	Ann	[It's just what we deal with. It's what we deal with, yeah. It's what the:y deal with.

Note.

[a]Transcriptions reflect Jeffersonian light notations (e.g., : = extended syllables; Ochs, 1979).

the:y deal with." She bookends this passage with an appeal to her initial statements that constructed teachers and students as connected by the classroom space and the impacts of poverty on their cooperative task: teaching and learning. These are discordant views of a high-poverty community context and the classroom space: language and society pit teachers against families, and against poverty more broadly. However, teachers disagree to a certain extent on what that means about families and homes as sites of poverty and about the intersection with school space.

Rurality

While Lottie opines metaphorically that people live in Stewartsville only because they've "run out of gas and this is where we stopped" (Appendix C), she also recreates an image of what the town used to be like, in conversation with Lisa: they describe a community in which people could be "productive members of society"*; residents didn't have to go to college to make "great money" and earn a decent living. This romantic and nostalgic version of a community where the "Jimmy Stewarts" lived in economic and social harmony is a traditional rural trope (Edmonson, 2003), but in the context of this dialogue it provides insight into the general anxiety and unease around the community's future. The realities of economic insecurity are evident in the increase of unemployment numbers and poverty rates at the time and the continued lack of industry

replacement after the manufacturing company abandoned the county in 2007. The jobs left in the area predominantly pay minimum wage, and as Lisa notes, they are "not something you could raise a family on."*

Yet despite the economic realities of postindustrial small-town rural life, rural schools continue to be a source of stability, community identity, and opportunity. In response to the difficulties of educating in a high-poverty area, Elaine exclaims that "the schools are probably the one positive thing in the community."* However, rural schools are also sites of contradiction in their dual role as community institutions and institutions of the state (Tieken, 2014), because ultimately, as Lisa comments, "if there's a ticket out of here, it's through us."* Lisa offers an identity for herself and her teachers of power and agency leveraged through the rural place they live.

The dialogue selection in Table 3 is discursively rich with its incorporation of a local referent and descriptor "Stewart-tucky" and of the illustrative phrase "no-go zone." While the K-2 teacher study group referred multiple times to the text provided by the researcher (and impetus behind these discussions), the grade 3-6 group only made one direct reference, and that is illustrated here. Kristine utilizes the "no-go zone" language from the text as a symbol of violence, drugs, and poverty in the Stewartsville community without having to directly

Table 3
Selection From Transcript Excerpt of a Final Study Group Session: Rurality

Turn	Speaker	Talk
1	Kristine	I always feel like people look at Stewartsville as a whole as a no-go zone. (1)[one second pause] Like, I grew up in Freesia:,[a] and I knew that, like, hey, (laughter). We have one elementary school, and everybody who I like, started kindergarten with is who I graduated with. And it was like, Stewartsville was like, a no-go zone. I don't feel that way no:w, but like, being on the outside, that's the way people thou:ght.
2	(overlapping)	
3	Alex	So even before, like so my timeline is like, pre: [auto plant] closing things here were still tough, because like factories had been closing for a while, but like, there was still a solid middle class. But that's not your experience of it? 'Cause I don't think you were in elementary school in 2007.
4	Kristine	(laughs) No, But that was still.
5	Lottie	Well, I think it was where you lived too. Cause you know, I taught in Rootsville before here, and always referred to it as Stewart-tucky. Well and I get over there and they call it Root-tucky. I'm like, what, really? (laughter) And I mean, and that's the sole base of it. Is that so many of the families were originally here settled from the foothills of Kentucky.
6	*unclear*	Placemound calls it Stewart-tucky too

Note.
[a]Transcriptions reflect Jeffersonian light notations (e.g., : = extended syllables, number in parenthesis for length of pause in seconds; Ochs, 1979).

use those words. She distances herself spatially ("being on the outside") and historically ("I grew up in Freesia") by using her own language. However, Lottie continues with Kristine's line of thinking in terms of the spatial relationship to Stewartsville ("well I think it was where you lived too") and subsequent perception of the community.

In introducing the term *Stewart-tucky*, Lottie builds upon the unclarified characteristics of the no-go zone by fixing the term to a geographic and historical origin. She defines the addition of the suffix "-tucky" to a local place to denote familial origins in "the foothills of Kentucky." Lottie provides another example in changing the town of Rootville to "Root-tucky." While geographically bound, this particular colloquialism is also rooted in the prevalent stereotyping of Appalachian poverty—a poverty that is often called "backwoods" and evokes images of rundown trailers, banjo music and coal miners' children. This version of poverty is also essentially rural and White (Tieken, 2014). Thus, by utilizing *Stewart-tucky* in this passage, Lottie is connecting historical and regional migration patterns with contemporary community poverty. Yet, there is also a differentiation and distancing

that occurs directly afterward in which Lisa, who is from Stewartsville, defends her family's origins: "My parents were always like, like proud that, yeah, we don't have any relatives in K(h)entucky" (Appendix C). She goes on to clarify that "those other people did." Even though the teachers responded light-heartedly by poking fun at her and asking, "Well where did you come from?," this act of distancing herself from the impoverished families in the same community is evident. Interestingly, the discourse itself does not associate value to one form of knowledge over another but connects the local terminology ("Stewart-tucky") with the academic terminology ("no-go zone"); thus, while disassociating some residents in the community, the terms establish a stronger bond between the teachers and the research.

Finally, this passage provides an example of the researcher-as-participant and her critical role as an outsider to the community. The researcher's outsider status impacts how the teachers explain their local version of rurality. Through the questioning of both timeline and industrial impact, Alex elucidates a (re)configuration of knowledge of the rural community. This discursive act constructs

research participants as knowledgeable but also embraces research as dynamic, unfolding or developing over time, and in constant dialogue with participants. Importantly, this exchange shows how the research site is a malleable and ever-developing space of "stories so far" (Massey, 2005, p. 10). Importantly, here we also see a critique of nostalgic, romantic, and static versions of rural communities. As the research site generates developing stories, so too do rural communities, and the benefits of allowing these stories to unfold is essential in situating teacher discourse in their local rural context.

Discussion and Conclusion

This analysis contributes to the literature in at least three ways. First, it reveals a distinct refutation of the neoliberal poverty and education discourses that declare human capital development and free-market competition to be the end goals of educational and economic policies. While the neoliberal discourse of standards, accountability, assessment, and competition dominate the national narrative on the purposes and processes of schooling, the teachers in this study reiterate these discourses in a limited fashion and mainly as a way to articulate the constraints on their professionalism. Teachers restrict their reference to neoliberal discourses as constraining their work environment through testing regimes and curricular limitations; however, the refutation of neoliberal discourse falls short of offering a counternarrative. Instead, the teachers foreground conservative poverty and schooling discourses that evoke moral judgments, stress character development, and imply a nostalgic and unattainable past that was unequivocally better than the present.

Second, it is evident across this particular data set that the teachers' discourse on poverty reaffirms common stereotypes of poor people (Gorski, 2008), including that poor parents do not value education, abuse alcohol and/or drugs, lack work ethic, and are "linguistically deficient" (Gorski, 2012, p. 311). Teachers develop this particular orientation to poverty through the lens of the classroom space and, as such, construct assumptions about home life and privilege what teachers need to do their work. However, unlike the neoliberal "no-excuses"

approach to teaching in high-poverty contexts, the teachers are unable to disentangle teaching practices from the real and perceived traumas experienced by their students. Additionally, while teachers coalesce around a poverty discourse that defines poverty as individualistic and deficient, they also point to structural changes such as industry abandonment and the prevalence of low-wage jobs as complicit in the high level of poverty in their community. It is this situated poverty discourse that helps teachers identify with and develop opposition orientations to their students, their families, the community, and the school. Importantly, they stress here the relationality of the spaces children occupy and demonstrate the challenge of connecting with and responding to the material impacts of poverty when it comes to the work of schooling and teaching.

Third, rurality is both a spatial denotation and an identifying characteristic, but it is not a static construct (Seelig, 2017). Within the study group discussions teachers defined Stewartsville's rurality through continuous comparison, geographically and culturally, with other rural, suburban, and even urban communities. In addition, teachers wove historical community-based narratives (e.g., industrial decline, migration patterns) through their personal experiences of the past in order to define what it means for their community to be rural. This speaks to the materiality and dominant discourses of rurality, poverty, and schooling as varied, produced from within, and contradictory. It also points to the need to explore spatial and place-based histories and presents in teacher education, for both teachers who are working in schools and teachers in training. Offering in-service and preservice teachers opportunities to examine their own positionalities in terms of spatial histories (their own, their students, and those of the school and community in which they work) can reveal biases that must be dismantled.

Perhaps most important, this teacher study group, the analysis we conducted, and sharing these findings with educators in Stewartsville had material implications for future collaborations between Alex and the teachers introduced in this study. While this article is a story of troubling dominant discourses that mattered to teachers and

their work with vulnerable children growing up in the rural rust belt, it is not the end of the story. Many public school teachers in Stewartsville responded to this story by directly confronting their work at the intersection of schooling and their rural community from the 2015–2016 school year and beyond (Panos, 2018). Just as we argue that rural places are not and should not be considered static and essentialized versions of themselves stuck in a moment in time, neither should the teachers in this article be understood as such. Here, too, are special implications for teacher education, in that difficult conversations hold the possibility, through tenacity on the part of educators and their collaborators, to be just one piece of an evolving, multifaceted, and complex approach to reimagining the role of teachers and schools in meeting community needs in rural contexts.

Indeed, our study indicates that the work of placing the intersections of broad discourses of rurality, poverty, and schooling both discredits and affirms these discourses and is part of concrete actionable choices on the part of educators. While rural education scholarship has a rich history of theoretically connecting place, identity, and schooling, we believe that a distinct social justice perspective would structure these theories as practical opportunities to resist and transform the discourses of damage (Tuck, 2009) and unhelpful discourses of nostalgia (Massey, 2005) that swirl around communities like Stewartsville. This research has implications for understanding the particular intersecting discourses that are currently circulating—producing and reproducing—in a White-majority, high-poverty rural rust belt, where children go to school and are taught by educators with their own complex orientations to schooling, rurality, and poverty. Efforts to disrupt these discourses require collaborations, reflections, and a sense of responsibility to such places and the educators living and working therein.

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Appendix A

Transcript Excerpt of a Final Study Group Session: Schooling

(Note: The numbers in parentheses indicates the length of a pause in seconds.)

Arianne: when you think about Stewartsville and the fact that we have so many low income families (1) it's not so much that the school system has, and we have, about as many resources as most school systems

Elaine: Right.

Arianne: Maybe less than those of Carmel Fischers, but

Alex: Right.

Arianne: But we do we:ll. I mean, we have iPads, we have computers, we have cle:an schools. I mean, we have a lot.

Alex: Right.

Arianne: But when we're talking about what we have to work with when the students come in, it almost doesn't matter how much you have. Because if they have no resources at home, when they're six, there's not much else we can do.

Elaine: And the things resource being here.

Arianne: Exactly.

Megan: And no support, nothing, no, they come with no background knowledge, nothing. And it isn't ever, increased. And you know. There is nothing for us to build upon even.

Elaine: We got some research at our kindergarten meeting, I don't know if we shared it with you yet, guys. But it showed, like, um, where kids come in, the last several years, and it's continued to go do:wn.

Alex: What do you mean when you say where kids come in?

Elaine: Like what they come in knowing. It's continued to slant down the last 3 or 4 years.

Alex: Oh:h.

Patti: And we've seen that in first grade.

Elaine: And we thought 4 years ago they were low. I mean now they don't have any background knowledge when they come in.

Arianne: And we can clearly see that.

Megan: I mean, just thinking to my own boys, and my own boys are 23 and 20, when they went to pre-school, when they went to kindergarten (.4), they could re:(h)ad when they started kindergarten. I mean not fabulous readers, but they were reading sma:ll, you know small books with ya know a few words on each page, they knew all their alphabet letters and the sounds: they could cut they could write their names↑. I mean they were just so::, and these kids come, and they, they don't recognize the alphabet letters, they, they can't recognize numbers

Elaine: They've never had a pair of scissors,

Arianne: Never mind a glue stick.

Elaine: No, no. They don't kno:w↑, they don't know how to hold a pencil. (1) Seriously. I mean, they come in not knowing how to hold any kind of writing device.

Arianne: I mean, scho:ols always are gonna have, we're always going to want more resources, cause we always want more for the students.

Alex: Right.

Arianne: Could we have more resources? :Yes. But we have just as much as most schools around us.

Elaine: :Exce:pt, the personnel. Most schools around us are doing just as bad with personnel as we are if not worse. And, at Anderson, they got rid of all of their aides before I even left.

Elaine: But isn't that our, the best resource?

Arianne: It is↑ but

Elaine: :if you use it the right way.

Arianne: It is bu:t, we're doing better than some other schools on resources, in terms of personnel. (2) We always want more resources, I'm not saying we have enough. We will never have enough. But, it doesn't matter how much we have, if there's nothing going at home.

Appendix B

Transcript Excerpt of a Final Study Group Session: Poverty

(Note: The numbers in parentheses indicates the length of a pause in seconds.)

Lisa: And she'll ask, you know, can I come get so and so when you're not doin' somethin'. I'm like no:, you get their head on straight whenever you want. (laughter) You know what I mean? You take them whenever. They're not gonna listen to me do math or social studies or whatever until you help them work out their problems, so, you know, take 'em any time. So I think, you know, I think we've done more as a school corporation, you know. We're feeding them, you know what I mean, doing lots' more with that, but I think, I think we have farther to go:

Kristine: =there's no emotional support

Lisa: Yeah, and I think, I think we need, to do that, just to help them. Cause they're not, you know (1) you gotta prioritize and, have a mental element

Ann: [you can't learn when you're thinkin' about what you saw last night, or: where you'll sleep tonight.

Kristine: Right, and when their parents are either depressed or they're anxious, and then the kids get the brute of it.

Lottie:[or they're drunk

Lottie: But how many of our kids now have parents who're addicts? Or in jail, or recovering, not, dead!

Ann: Or brothers or sisters that are

Kristine: =responsible?

Ann: [in jail! I mean that's just, my brother's in jail again! We:ll:, what else do you got? (laughter)

Lisa: It's not an excuse for us not doing stuff, I just think we need. I mean.

Ann: [It's just what we deal with. It's what we deal with, yeah. It's what the:y deal with. (2) And I always say, you know, every year I hate, I hate like parent night, you know after the first month of school? Cause I'd rather not know. Do you know what I mean? I'd rather just have, yeah I'd rather just

Lisa: [rather just have the kids

Ann: Exactly, have the kids, you know cause you've had those kids for a month. And you've developed this rapport with them, and this relationship, and then you meet their people and it's like oh I'm so sorry.

Tori: [and it's like ohh

Unclear: Yeah

Lisa: It's just yeah, it's just weird.

Kristine: =but then I always feel bad for the students who do have a good support system, because you already have this mindset that parents su:ck (laughter) (2).[AP3]

Lisa: But your parents aren't so bad!

Tori: Yeah, your parents don't suck. And that is true, because usually when I talk about this as a whole, I talk about the negatives about it, but there are some good families too (oh: yeah!) some great families. It's just a m(h)atter of overwhelmingly not so great.

Lisa: [and we have some families in poverty that are wonderful.

Tori: Oh absolutely. Yeah, I mean. (4)

Appendix C

Transcript Excerpt of a Final Study Group Session: Rurality

(Note: The numbers in parentheses indicates the length of a pause in seconds.)

Kristine: I always feel like people look at Stewartsville as a whole as a no-go zone. (1) Like, I grew up in Liberty:, and I knew that, like, hey, (laughter). We have one elementary school, and everybody who I like, started kindergarten with is who I graduated with. And it was like, Stewartsville was like, a no-go zone. I don't feel that way no:w, but like, being on the outside, that's the way people thou:ght.

(overlapping)

Alex: So even before, like so my timeline is like, pre: [auto plant] closing things here were still tough, because like factories had been closing for awhile, but like, there was still a solid middle class. But that's not your experience of it? Cause I don't think you were in elementary school in 2007.

Kristine: (laughs) No. But that was still.

Lottie: Well, I think it was where you lived too. Cause you know, I taught in Rushville before here, and always referred to it as Stewart-tucky. Well and I get over there and they call it Rush-tucky. I'm like, what, really? (laughter) And I mean, and that's the sole base of it. Is that so many of the families were originally here settled from the foothills of Kentucky.

Unclear: Richmond calls it Stewart-tucky too.

Rachel: Well and then part of it, I think, is like sport rivalries. You

Lisa:[Yeah, I mean you didn't like Rushville, you didn't like Liberty, you didn't like Richmond. I will say that my, my parents were always like, like proud that, yeah, we don't have any relatives in K(h)entucky. (laughs) I mean, I mean, you know what I'm saying? Like yeah, we didn't come from Kentucky. And those other people did. (laughs) I mean, I don't know.

Lottie: Well where did you come from? (laughter)

Lisa: I don't know! (laughter)

Rachel: Oh she comes from Nantucket, oh I don't know. (laughter)

Lisa: I don't know. But you know what I mean? Like over

Rachel: [Oh yes, I spend my summers cra:bbing (laughter)

Lisa: Yeah I don't know. (laughter)

Lottie: And then you run into the Stewartsville, and you run out of gas, and this is where we stopped.