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"Hidden Gems" and "Rough Mannerisms": Examining Preservice Teachers' Discourses of Place and Rurality

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While research has examined preservice teachers' perceptions toward rural schools, there is limited research on how they navigate their own discourses of rural communities, particularly for preservice teachers embedded in the rural communities in which they teach. In this exploratory qualitative study, we examine the discourses of place and rurality of four preservice teachers (residents) while enrolled in a rural teacher residency program in the northeastern United States. Findings suggest that rural residents' discourses oscillated between place "as it is" and place as it "ought to be" as they identified strengths and challenges of generalized and specific rural communities. Additionally, findings suggest that preservice teachers engaged with and resisted idyllic and deficit discourses of place and rurality, drawing on their experiences living in and engaging with the unique contexts of their rural communities. We offer implications of this work for our responsibility as teacher educators who prepare teachers for schools and the rural contexts in which they will teach.
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***Keywords*: rural teacher preparation, teacher residency, preservice teachers, discourses, place, rurality**

For almost 70 years, advocates of rural education have called for specialized preparation of teachers for rural schools (Azano & Stewart, 2015; Yarrow et al., 1999). While each rural community is distinctly unique, rural schools tend to face similar opportunities (e.g., smaller class sizes, the centrality of the school in the community) and challenges (e.g., geographic remoteness, professional isolation, economic transition) that set them apart from urban and suburban schools (Barley, 2009; Biddle & Azano, 2016; Fry & Anderson, 2011). Drawing on these common and unique features, research suggests that teachers need place-specific knowledge and skills to work and live in rural communities (Biddle & Azano, 2016; White & Reid, 2008).

A growing number of teacher preparation programs have implemented coursework and field experiences to support preservice teachers in learning about the rural schools and communities in which they will teach (e.g., Azano & Stewart, 2015; Barley, 2009; White & Reid, 2008). While research has examined preservice teachers' attitudes and perceptions toward rural schools (e.g., Azano & Stewart, 2016; Burkett & Gimbert, 2009; Islam, 2012; Kaden & Patterson, 2014; Kline & Walker-Gibbs, 2015; Lock, 2008; O'Neal et al., 2008), there is limited research exploring how preservice teachers conceptualize and articulate their understandings of the rural communities in which they will teach while simultaneously navigating dominant social and cultural discourses on rurality. This is of particular relevance for preservice teachers who have experience living in rural communities prior to enrolling in a teacher preparation program (e.g., Burton & Johnson, 2010).

In this exploratory qualitative study, we examine preservice teachers' (known as "residents") discourses of place and rurality while enrolled in a rural teacher preparation program, Rural Teacher Residency (RTR).[1] Specifically, we address the following research questions:

- What are residents' discourses of place within a specific rural context?
- What are residents' discourses of rurality in relation to the strengths and challenges of a specific rural context?
- What is the interaction between residents' discourses of place and rurality?

Here, we examine how four rural-embedded residents engage with these discourses and the extent to which they embrace or push against commonly held discourses of rurality.

Conceptual Framework

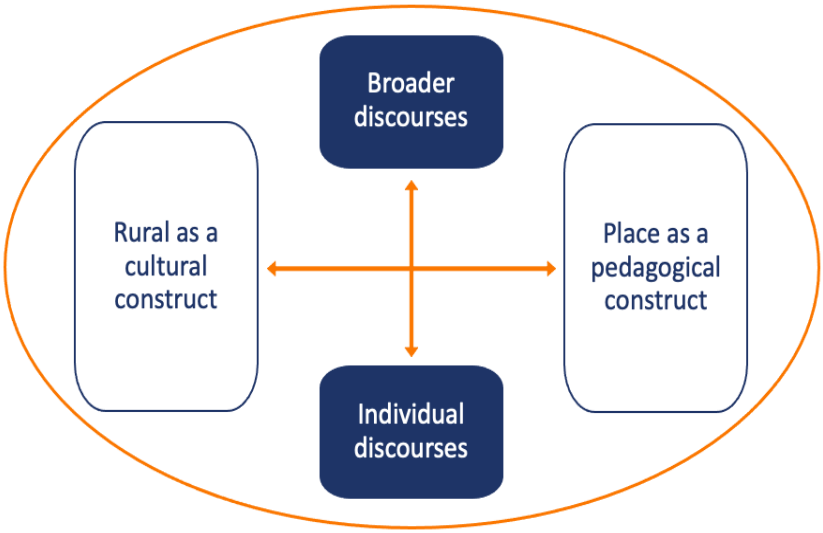
This study is framed by discourses of place and rurality. We draw on Gee's (2014) notion of "Discourse" to consider how language is used for communication as well as to signify membership within particular social communities that engage in particular actions. For example, teachers use specific language when enacting the role of the teacher in a school that they may not use in less formal contexts, such as at home. In the current study, discourse encompasses how preservice teachers interact with broad concepts of place and rurality as well as how they make sense of their own roles and identities in a specific rural context. This understanding of discourse considers both language preservice teachers use to talk about place and rurality as well as broader already-existing discourses in which they participate, those built on local histories, cultural values, social norms, and beliefs of a particular rural place. These discourses overlap, reinforce, and mutually shape one another as preservice teachers participate in and shape them.

[1] Rural Teacher Residency is a pseudonym for the residency program. All individual names and organizations described in this study are pseudonyms.

The current study examines the relationship between prevailing discourses of place and rurality – many of which are grounded in stereotypes of rural people and communities (Biddle & Azano, 2016) – as well as preservice teachers' own values and judgments about the communities in which they will teach and the people who inhabit and shape specific communities (see Figure 1).

We situate our understanding of place within theories of place-based (e.g., Sobel, 2004) and place-conscious (e.g., Greenwood, 2013) education. Such theories draw on the local context to inform curriculum (Sobel, 2004; White & Reid, 2008) and build on the pedagogical nature of places as they relate to the broader social, cultural, political, and economic landscape (Greenwood, 2013; Vernikoff et al., 2018). These approaches offer an alternative to decontextualized and *placeless* forms of teacher preparation that position teaching and learning as disconnected from the communities in which they exist (Haberman, 1996). We view the place as a dynamic pedagogical construct rather than a static backdrop for teaching and learning. The place encompasses social, historical, cultural, and political relations and practices that are ever-shifting and evolving (Schafft & Jackson, 2010). Put another way, places (like discourses) shape and are shaped by the values, interests, and priorities of those who inhabit them (Reagan et al., 2019).

Figure 1
Conceptual Framework



Similarly, we frame rurality as a "cultural construct" (Kline & Walker-Gibbs, 2015; Reagan et al., 2019). Following other rural teacher education researchers, we recognize that the descriptor "rural" embodies a number of competing discourses. For example, Anthony-Stevens and Langford (2020) observed that discourses of "White, pastoral, and culturally static" rural places operate in many areas of the United States (p. 334). In Australia, scholars have noted that discourses of rurality often position it as deficient in

contrast to "metro-centric" norms (Campbell & Yates, 2011), which has implications for rural schools being perceived as undesirable, difficult to staff, and even backward (Reid et al., 2010). Further, rural can be understood as both "a quantitative measure" in terms of distance from an urban center, population density, natural resources, economic drivers, and transition and as a "cultural construct" in terms of the identity and social constructions of those who inhabit it (Kline & Walker Gibbs, 2015, pp. 68–69). Its existence depends partially on the complex and overlapping considerations of geography, demography, and economy. It is further shaped by the commonalities and norms local community members know, emphasize, and consider important and that are constituted in everyday interactions and events.

We explicitly reject discourses that oversimplify rural places as either idyllic or fundamentally deficient and argue that both are inherently problematic. The "idyllic trope" portrays a limited view of rural places as cohesive, conflict-free communities and fails to acknowledge the reality of the challenges they face (Azano & Stewart, 2016, p. 115). In contrast, deficit discourses position rural schools and communities as problems to be fixed; by emphasizing what is perceived to be lacking in terms of resources and proximity to urban centers, rural schools (and, by extension, students) are subsequently identified as undesirable (Reid et al., 2010). These discourses lack attention to the complexity of rural places (e.g., Lichter & Brown, 2011), and we actively work against overly broad descriptions that define rurality only in contrast to the norms of metrocentric (Campbell & Yates, 2011).

Literature Review

Recent research on rural teacher preparation has focused on specific components of teacher preparation that aim to recruit and prepare teachers for rural schools and communities (Reagan et al., 2019). In particular, researchers have examined the extent to which there is a rural focus in teacher preparation (e.g., Barley, 2009) and whether and how specific teacher preparation structures (e.g., coursework, field-based experiences) support preservice teacher preparation and commitment to teaching in rural schools. Overall, the research suggests that rural-focused coursework and field-based experiences in rural schools and communities contribute to preservice teachers' awareness of rural contexts and encourage preservice teachers to examine their perceptions of rural schools and communities (e.g. Azano & Stewart, 2015, 2016; Burkett & Gimbert, 2009; Islam, 2012; Kaden & Patterson, 2014; Kline & Walker-Gibbs, 2015; Kline et al., 2013; Lock, 2008; O'Neal et al., 2008; Sharplin, 2010). However, the research also suggests that after completing coursework and field-based experiences, preservice teachers want more experience in rural schools and communities. In other words, a set of courses or isolated field-based experiences are not enough for preservice teachers to combat the fragmented nature of the preparation for instruction in rural schools or for them to develop complex understandings of rural communities.

There have been calls for initiatives to recruit teachers who are from rural communities as rural-embedded prospective teachers may bring insider and local knowledge to teaching (e.g., Barley & Brigham, 2008; Monk, 2007). Furthermore, as Reid et al. (2010) argue, knowing about a place can contribute to the relevance and connectedness of the school curriculum and to the sustainability of rural places. Some evidence suggests that these programs and initiatives attract teachers who are rooted in and committed to teaching in rural communities (e.g., Cobbold, 2006; Miller, 2012; Monk, 2007). However, following the work of Somerville et al. (2010), Reagan and colleagues (2019) cautioned that

> knowing a place by virtue of having lived or grown up there can prove problematic for teachers. Assumed knowledge of "the rural" can effectively counteract the process of coming to know a particular place and consequently coming to know oneself there. In other words, a sense of place is linked with one's construction of self in that place through conscious and intentional interaction. (p. 87)

Thus, even though preservice teachers can bring insider knowledge and experience, they also need multiple opportunities to unpack competing discourses of rural schools and communities. As Anthony-Stevens and Langford (2020) argue, "teacher education in rurality must commit to establishing pedagogical conditions that enable rural preservice teachers to critically analyze dominant definitions of rural spaces—and to examine how such definitions influence identity making and identity denial in rurality" (p. 342).

In our study, we attend to these advances in rural teacher preparation while also responding to recent calls in the field of rural teacher education research. Roberts and Cuervo (2015) challenge the rural education research field to broaden their discussion, confronting the fact "that in many studies that pass as 'rural' the meaning and nature of rurality is not central to the research or often taken for granted," and calling for researchers to "value rural people and communities and ensure rurality is central to the research agenda." (p. 7). Additionally, Their and colleagues (2021) identify "research deserts" within rural education, citing the relative dearth of studies that geographically take place in the northeastern United States, that involve post-secondary education settings, or that focus on teachers rather than K-12 students.

Context & Methods

This study is part of a larger longitudinal study of the impact of the rural teacher residency program on residents' learning and practice. In this exploratory qualitative study, we analyzed rural-embedded residents' discourses of place and rurality while enrolled in a rural teacher residency program (RTR). Established in 2016 as part of a Teacher Quality Partnership federal grant, RTR is a 15-month graduate-level program that prepares residents to become elementary and secondary mathematics and science

teachers in rural high-need schools[2] in a northern region of a northeastern U.S. state. The rural communities central to RTR are geographically separated from the rest of the state by a vast mountain range. Run by a public, research-intensive university, RTR is intentionally embedded in the rural communities in which the preservice teachers will teach. During the time of this study, coursework as well as school-based, community-based, and professional development opportunities were offered to preservice teachers two hours north of the university in the mountain region where RTR preservice teachers, district partners, and community partners were located. The structure and location of the program were aligned with the goal of preservice teachers getting to know and preparing to teach within a particular community (Reagan et al., 2018).

RTR faculty and staff supported the program's commitment to place-based tenets since the program's inception. In particular, RTR faculty and staff sought to challenge deficit discourses around the concept of place and rurality by providing opportunities for preservice teachers to think critically about their understandings and expectations of rural communities. Assignments in the program's introductory coursework focused heavily on discussion of and reflection on residents' experiences within particular rural communities. This was carried out with the intention of preparing these teachers for *somewhere*, as opposed to *everywhere* (Vernikoff et al., 2018).

As a five-person research team consisting of RTR faculty and staff, we were particularly interested in the ways in which preservice teachers engaged with discourses of place and rurality. Three of us had experiences working with the participants in this study as program leaders and course instructors. The other two of us joined the program after the participants in this study graduated and had begun teaching in partner schools in the region. During the time of data collection for this study, none of us worked directly with the participants in this study.

Participants

Participants in this study included four rural-embedded residents from RTR's first cohort, Amanda, Jessica, Kristin, and Mary, who lived in the rural region of the state prior to enrolling in the residency program. Some considered themselves outsiders after living in their communities for more than five years (e.g., Amanda), and others moved back to the towns where they grew up (e.g., Mary). The participants all identified as white women with children of their own, all held bachelor's degrees, and they were all career changers with more than five years of professional experience that included working in schools prior to enrolling in RTR. As presented in Table 1, the residents' undergraduate majors included business management, early childhood education, and sciences. Their prior

[2] The phrase “high-need school” is defined by the proportion of students who qualify for Free- and Reduced-Price Lunch per the requirements of the federal grant.

school-based experiences ranged from paraprofessionals to Title I educators to speech and language assistants. The residents also varied in terms of the certification area(s) they were pursuing in RTR, including elementary education, middle school science education, and secondary life science (biology) certification. Two of the four residents completed requirements across multiple certification pathways.

Table 1
Participant Information[3]

Pseudonyms (N = 4)	Educational Backgrounds	Professional Backgrounds	RTR Certification Pathways
Amanda Jessica Kristin Mary	Undergraduate majors: ● Management ● Biology ● Early Childhood Education ● Animal Science	● Paraprofessionals (N=2) ● Title I educators (N=1) ● Speech and Language educators (N=1)	● Elementary (K-6) (N=2) ● Elementary & Middle School Science (K-8) (N=1) ● Middle School Science (5-8) & Secondary Life Science (7-12) (N=1)

Data Sources

In this study, the primary data source came from one particular RTR course, "Sociocultural Perspectives of Curriculum, Pedagogy, and Place," that took place during the first summer term of the program. We chose this course because of its centrality to RTR's mission of understanding place and rurality as complex, multi-faceted constructs. The course had a field-based component, requiring preservice teachers to participate in a 30-hour internship with a community-based organization (CBO). Examples of these internship sites include recreation centers, family centers, and outdoor education organizations. As part of this course, residents were asked to record and reflect on observations from their internships and community interactions through the use of field notes (Emerson et al., 2011). These field notes were then used by residents, in combination with readings and discussions on place and rurality, to write a series of three

[3] Participant information is aggregated to preserve the confidentiality of participants' individual demographic, professional, and educational backgrounds.

thought papers throughout the summer (n=12 thought papers across all participants, consisting of approximately 75 pages worth of data). We triangulated the residents' thought papers with other data from the larger study, including residents' descriptions of rurality in pre- and post-residency surveys and post-residency focus groups.

Analyses

Our approach to qualitative data analysis was iterative (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). As a team, we read through the corpus of data multiple times. We broke into subgroups, where we individually read residents' thought papers from the course, first creating and then utilizing the coding spectra shown in Table 2. One subgroup focused on the "contextualization" spectrum and discourse of place, assessing where preservice teachers were (or were not) making connections between concepts of place and the context of the local schools and communities. The second subgroup focused on two spectra: the "characterization" spectrum was used to assess whether preservice teachers were identifying a topic as a strength, challenge, or merely a description of the associated place, and the "valence" spectrum identified whether the resident was assigning a positive, negative, or indeterminate value to the place's handling of that same topic. Each researcher individually segmented the data based on meaning and continuous thoughts – segment size varied from parts of sentences to spans of a full page or more – and coded the resulting passages. Subgroups met to discuss the segmentation and coding; when differences were identified, we used evidence from the data to come to a consensus.

Table 2
Coding Spectra

Spectrum	Codes		
Contextualization	Place as Concept Only	Place as Context Only	Place Explicitly Connecting Concept and Context
Characterization	Strength of the Community/Place	Challenge for the Community/Place	Description of the Community/Place
Valence	Positive Judgment of the Community/Place	Negative Judgment of the Community/Place	Indeterminate Judgment of the Community/Place

We then met as a full research team to examine the convergence of the subgroups' coding, discussing and summarizing each passage and confirming codes across the

three spectra. Each individual team member then analyzed patterns and themes that emerged from each of the participants.

One tool used for this was creating a State Space Grid (SSG)[4] (Hollenstein, 2013; Lewis et al., 1999). The purpose of an SSG is to go beyond conventional analysis, representing the data as a dynamic system (Hollenstein, 2013; van Vondel et al., 2017). This is particularly valuable in the current study's third research question, investigating the interaction between the preservice teachers' discourses of place and rurality. Believing that the interactions between the three coded spectra are complex and dynamic rather than simple linear relationships, SSGs allow us to align with the "science of the individual" (Rose et al., 2013, p. 152) and visualize patterns and interactions accordingly.

After multiple rounds of coding and iterative analyses, we narrowed the focus of the third research question to specifically investigate the residents' interaction with broader discourses of idyllic and deficit framing of rural places. To this end, we concentrated subsequent analysis on the left column of the SSG representing preservice teachers' positive judgments for possible evidence of idyllic discourse and on the right column representing residents' negative judgments for possible evidence of deficit discourse. This use of the SSG was particularly valuable in understanding the discourse interactions as a dynamic complex system since this visual representation allowed us to look at the "conceptualization," "characterization," and "valence" spectra simultaneously. These, along with other findings, are explained in the following section.

Findings

We organize our findings by the three research sub-questions. First, we found that residents' discourses of place varied from abstract terms and ideas around place (place as concept) to specific terms and examples (place as context) to drawing specific connections between place as a context and concept (connection). We describe these variations as residents' discourses of place "as it ought to be" (a general description of place) and discourses of "place as it is" (a description of a place with specificity). Second, we found that the four residents' discourses of rurality were expressed in terms of their thinking around perceived challenges and strengths surrounding and within rural communities. Third, we found that through the interaction among discourses of place and rurality, residents tended to engage with dominant idyllic and deficit understandings of

[4] SSGs allow visualization of multiple data points on two or three dimensions, and the ability to analyze complex dynamic systems. In a basic sense, a SSG is essentially a scatterplot graph that can utilize ordinal, nominal or categorical variables, by displaying it as categorical on both the X- and Y-axes. This creates a grid - in the case of the present study with three rows and three columns, resulting in 9 individual cells - where each cell is a possible "state" that any given passage may exist in. Additionally, a third dimension of data may be represented, with each point on the grid signified in an appropriate color.

rurality and place. However, in some cases, the residents resisted these dominant discourses as described below.

Discourses of Place: "As It Ought to Be" Versus "As It Is"

Our analysis of the contextualization spectrum revealed that the four residents discussed[5] "place" in one of three ways. In some cases, the four residents did not focus on a particular rural location but instead referred more generally to characteristics often associated with rurality (e.g., a supportive, close-knit community). In these instances, they talked about ideas related to theories of place, such as social, geographic, and demographic characteristics, but did not use individual people, organizations, or locations to tell the story of the place. In contrast, residents' discussions of place sometimes focused on the specific context in which they lived and worked. Here, residents constructed narratives featuring individuals, organizations, and towns by name in order to illustrate their understanding of place. Finally, residents sometimes made explicit connections between place as a concept and their own specific context in which they would refer to specific people, organizations, or locations to explain or provide an example of a concept of place.

Discourses of Place "As It Ought to Be"

In conceptual discourses of place, residents' language refers to normative perceptions about the relationship between schools and communities and how they ought to operate interdependently. For example, the four residents drew on these norms to describe how educators *should* build relationships with families and communities. Amanda stated, *"If I know my community and the families within, I can teach the students in the way that suits their needs because I will understand their environment" (Amanda, Thought Paper 1).* Amanda suggests that the teacher's role is not only to support students but also to do so by being an active participant in the community. Such observations and statements could be about any school or community; Amanda's description did not reflect the specificity of a particular rural community.

Across the thought papers, the four residents noted the importance of out-of-school learning experiences, endorsed asset-based approaches as a good way to support students, and noted an increased awareness of life outside the school without referencing specific people or organizations. The residents consistently emphasized the importance of collaboration and building knowledge of a community through observation. Kristin stated, *"To truly get to know a community, one must recognize the importance of genuine and authentic relationships. Observations can be clear indicators of how the community functions through examining the dynamic fellowship of a society" (Kristin,*

[5] As described in our methods, all data from preservice teachers was in written form. Following Gee (2014), we include this writing as a form of discourse, and use the terms "said," "discussed," and "talked about" interchangeably in reference to the writing samples analyzed for this study.

Thought Paper 1). In these examples, the residents refer to the notion that one must come to know a place by learning about its people and values, a core idea of theories of place, but without offering specific examples of how or with whom to form authentic relationships.

Discourses of Place "As It Is"

In the thought papers, the four residents' descriptions of context were, for the most part, shared as narrative accounts of their experiences as participant observers in the community. They told stories about the communities in which they lived and worked and the specific people and places they interacted with served as characters and settings. The details they described appeared to be rooted not only in their observations but also in the past knowledge of the people and places they describe, underscoring Gee's (2014) conception of the role of context in discourse, which includes "what has previously been said and done by those involved in the communication; and any shared knowledge those involved have, including shared cultural knowledge" (p. 12).

In many cases, the residents described their observations of children's social behaviors across settings (e.g., activities with community organizations, camps, and neighborhoods), interactions with other residents and adults, and exchanges between caregivers and children. They talked about these contextual interactions in ways that both reflected their views of and experiences in the specific place and simultaneously served to solidify that view through their descriptions. In one example, Mary described her experiences working with a local group that facilitated outdoor activities for children in the community: *"The group [of children] was excited to have a strategy and work together without any one clear leader taking over. This experience was reminiscent of my experiences this summer observing the neighborhood kids [in the rural community] organizing their own fun" (Mary, Thought Paper 3).* In her description, Mary went on to make many references to specific landmarks and organizations to describe how the students involved in the activity related to one another and to the places she mentioned and emphasized her familiarity with the shared knowledge of the area.

In another example, Jessica relayed a conversation in which another adult referred to a community organization as a *"hidden gem."* Jessica further explained:

> *This place is truly a community-based center that needs to be shared more. I am picturing flyers and a current website, maybe handouts that can go home with children at school. Our district already has the After School Program through them, so why wouldn't we try to 'sell' the other services they have to offer?" (Jessica, Thought Paper 2)*

Jessica used the names of specific adults and specific community organizations to tell the story of the communities in which they lived and worked. Both Jessica and Mary's descriptions position themselves as "knowers" of place by illustrating their shared

knowledge of the people, organizations, and landmarks within their respective communities.

Tensions Between "Ought to Be" and "What Is"

When the residents made connections between place as a concept ("what ought to be") and as context ("what is"), we observed they were often negotiating how a community ought to be with how a community actually is. The residents highlighted nuanced and complex attributes of students that might go unnoticed and were underappreciated in a school setting. For example, Mary wrote,

> *Another student who has trouble completing assignments in school and staying on task is fabulous with young children. He constantly has the grade school children organized in games when attending his siblings' events and activities. When he sees the grade school kids in the halls of the high school, he not only acknowledges them but makes a point of talking to them and giving them high fives or fist bumps. I so enjoy seeing this kind-hearted side of a student who is sometimes misjudged in the school setting. (Mary, Thought Paper 3)*

Mary's discussion here challenges the idea of judging students based on academic norms (e.g., completing assignments) by pointing out qualities of a particular student that are obscured by how he does in school. She then offers examples of other characteristics that she views as just as important and noteworthy in broader community contexts.

There was also a socioeconomic thread in the preservice teachers' connections between concepts and context and a theme of descriptions of abundance versus scarcity. In negotiating the tension between what is and what ought to be and asking how communities might get to a place of valuing a variety of contributions, the residents wrestled with a tricky balance: acknowledging the existence of barriers contributing to scarcity while resisting descriptions of specific places that defined them by barriers or perceived lack of resources. Kristin said, *"Our remote location means we must travel a little further to access opportunities, but the quaint, quiet, and closeness with the community outweighs the seclusion. As with most communities, we rally together when times get tough." (Kristin, Thought Paper 3)*. Although they made some general statements about how they thought schools should or could operate, the four residents also grounded these wonderings with knowledge and observation in their specific contexts.

Discourses of Rurality: Challenges and Strengths

When examining discourses of rurality, we were particularly interested in the intersection between "characterization" (i.e., strengths and challenges) and "valence" (i.e., positive and negative judgments) coding spectra because these excerpts demonstrated residents' thinking around perceived challenges and strengths of rural

places. We found that across the assignments, the majority of the residents' descriptions of rural communities had no discernable judgment (positive or negative) about specific community members or rural community characteristics; rather, they tended to describe observations, ask questions regarding specific observations or interactions, or reflect on ways they may have judged circumstances prior to the RTR program. When residents described challenges, they tended to focus on the lack of resources, poverty conditions, the need for increased home-school-community connections, and the perceived disconnect felt by youth inside of schools. When residents described the strengths of rural communities, they tended to describe specific organizations, "community," and getting to know kids to support them in and out of the classroom.

Discourses of Rural Challenges

In passages coded as "challenges" of rural communities, the four residents tended to focus on the lack of resources and poverty conditions of the rural communities in which they were working. In these examples, the residents tended to reframe challenges to describe community resiliency and coming together in response to challenges. For example, in one thought paper, Kristin described, "*The 'pioneer' spirit is strong and will only continue to grow as the greater community strives to develop and demand support for one another. To know that you have others in the same 'boat' and willing to share the load helps to make rural life a bit more bearable" (Kristin, Thought Paper 3).* Here, Kristin described the general community response to "rural life," and ways in which coming together strengthen the community and support each other through burdens and challenges.

When residents described the challenges of rural communities negatively, their discourses tended to focus on specific judgments about a teacher or community member and their attitudes towards individuals or groups. In these examples, the residents may have been making judgments about community members who spoke negatively about students, families, or particular groups. For example, while observing an interaction at her community internship site, Mary noted,

> W*hile at [Mountain] Lake, I overheard one of the teachers apologize to Sean [a counselor] in front of students about the low academic ability of the group he had spent the day working with. I had not seen Sean have any problems with the students throughout the day, and I felt [the teacher] was selling the students short by labeling the group poor." (Mary, Thought Paper 3)*

In this example, Mary's negative judgment is regarded as a teacher-to-teacher interaction in which one teacher describes students outside of school in a negative light.

Discourses of Rural Strengths

In contrast to the perceived challenges of rural communities, the four residents described the strengths of rural communities either with positive or indeterminate value judgments. In particular, the residents described specific organizations and businesses that they viewed as resources for the community and opportunities where kids could be authentically themselves. For example, Mary described an outdoor education organization where kids could just be themselves, thrive independently, and explore nature. Drawing on these opportunities and resources, Mary raised questions about how teachers in schools could see students for who they are rather than in terms of their academic abilities or achievement.

Additionally, the residents described the strengths of rural places through what they perceived as examples of a strong and tight-knit community. Here, they highlighted that the strengths of the community outweighed the deficits or challenges of living in a specific rural place. In Kristin's third thought paper, she shared an example of the community rallying around a family after a fire to donate resources and toys, describing the sentiment that community members were more likely to mobilize and stick together, exemplified by a child who "gave what she had" to help another family. The residents drew on specific examples where individuals demonstrated the "Yankee spirit" and converged around supporting each other through challenging times.

Finally, when describing the strengths of rural places, the four residents highlighted the need to genuinely get to know students as a strength of rural places in and out of school settings. For example, Amanda drew on her experience as a speech-language pathologist and how she got to know students whom she supported. Kristin aimed to build on the "functional pioneer spirit" to develop a community in her classroom based on teamwork and respect for the individual. Mary aimed to see students in a positive light, as who they are outside of school and in the community. Together, these strengths were often positioned in terms of the perceived assets of rural communities and community-centeredness, as well as the ideals of how they wanted to draw in the assets of rural communities in the classroom.

Interaction Between Place and Rurality: Navigating Idyllic and Deficit Discourses

We recognized their engagement in common discourses of rurality and place as we examined how the four residents discussed these perceived strengths and challenges. One of these discourses is that of rural as idyllic, associating a rural place solely with presumed and stereotypical benefits of living and teaching in these places (e.g., close-knit community, small class sizes, connection to nature). Simultaneously, we saw evidence of the residents engaging with the discourse of rural as a deficit, associating rural places with only generalized challenges (e.g., lack of resources, facing economic hardships, metro-centric view of rurality). While we identified patterns of both idyllic and

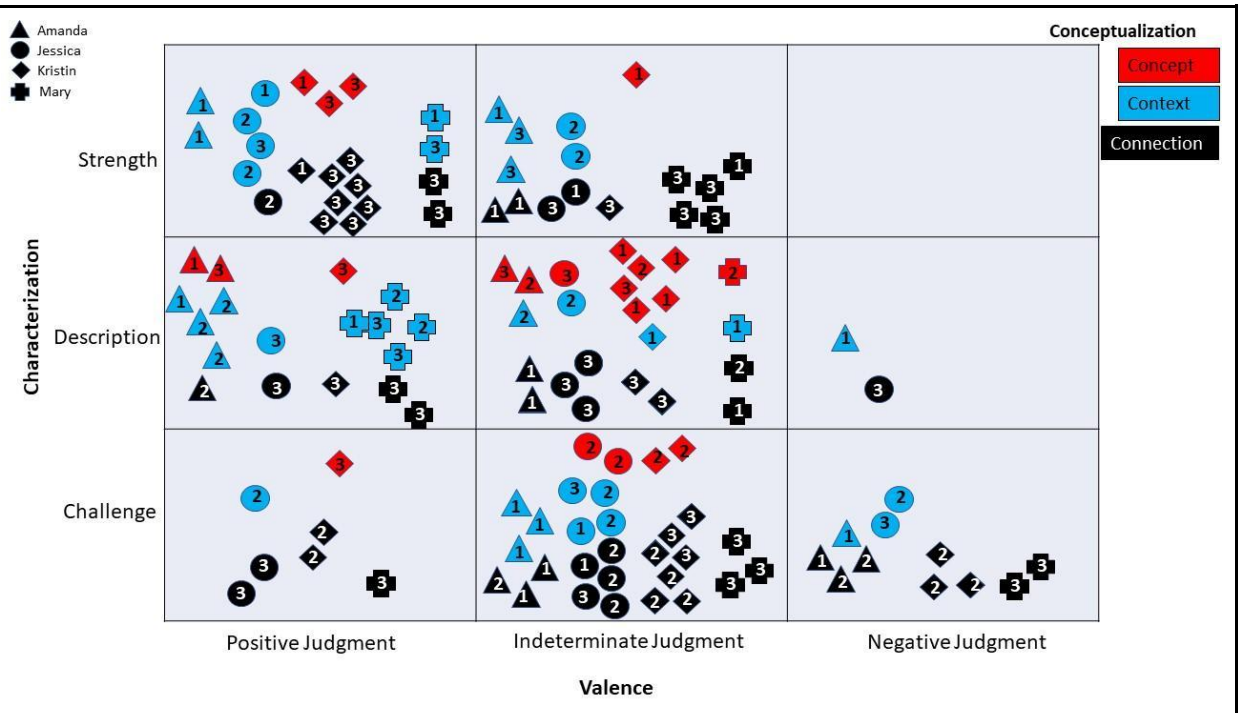
deficit discourse across the residents' thought papers, we also identified examples of the residents resisting these discourses. We identified several patterns that the residents used to disrupt idyllic and deficit discourses. In the following subsections, we draw on our textual analysis, as well as patterns observed in the SSG (Figure 2), to describe these disruptions.

Resisting Discourses of Idyllic Rurality and Place

As can be seen in the left column of Figure 2, the residents made quite a few positive judgments, relatively speaking. In the vast majority of these, they engaged in idyllic discourse in their context-bounded narrative descriptions from their observations in the community. These included previously mentioned references to the "pioneer" or "Yankee" spirit in the region. This idyllic discourse was also marked by stories of the community rallying together, which Amanda summarized as *"The town does such a great job helping others" (Amanda, Thought Paper 1).* When residents resisted idyllic discourse, they tended to do so in one of three ways: they applied a lesson learned to their teaching, contrasted in-school with out-of-school observations, or asked questions.

Figure 2

Fully Disaggregated State Space Grid



Note. This SSG displays fully disaggregated data, with each coded passage from each thought paper from each participant as a separate visual representation (N=128 coded passages). Each participant is depicted in a different shape, within which the source of

the respective passage (number of the thought paper) is shown. The Valence and Characterization spectra are shown across the x- and y-axis, respectively, and color depicts the Conceptualization spectrum.

One way that the four residents resisted idyllic discourse was by taking what they had learned from a person or organization and applying it to their own emerging teaching practice. An example of this is when Jessica later reflected on what motivated her admiration for the "hidden gem" organization and applied that to the school in the community where she lived,

> *I know [my school] was talking about doing home visits, and I see the ["hidden gem" organization] as a great model for this. Maybe more collaboration in this area would be beneficial to our teachers and administrators. I am looking forward to learning even more about the ins and outs of the services provided, along with success rates and strategies that seem to work for the team and can be carried over into the classroom, school, and community. (Jessica, Thought Paper 2)*

In this example, Jessica resisted the oversimplified discussion of a community organization to consider the more complex issue of how, as a future educator, she can integrate what she learns from local organizations into her own classroom practice.

The second way residents resisted idyllic discourse was by juxtaposing observations of students in a community setting with the school's framing of the same students. This always contrasted the students' positive perception and performance outside of the school with the negative school experience. This could be seen in the connection Mary made (shared above) about her kind-hearted student who struggled with staying on-task in school and yet took charge of younger neighborhood children to support and encourage them. She described the experience of getting to know students outside of school as important because "*Many times the young adults I worked with in class were very different people outside of the confines of school*" *(Mary, Thought Paper 3).*

The four residents also resisted idyllic discourses when they posed questions rather than took positions during their observations and reflections on the community. Kristin posed a question when community members reported that, in their town, poverty had little impact on students' social experience in school or during athletics. Connecting these community reports and observations with what she was learning in her coursework, she took an inquiry stance rather than adopting or dismissing this contrasting information. She asked, "*At what age do youth begin to recognize a social distortion based on income inequality...does socioeconomic status, of which youth have no control, affect their social*

involvement?" *(Kristin, Thought Paper 2).* As discussed in the next section, this led to her ongoing investigation of poverty in the rural community.

Resisting Deficit Discourses of Rurality and Place

The four residents made very few explicitly negative judgments in their writing, as seen in the right column of Figure 2. In those negative judgments, residents occasionally engaged in simple deficit discourses based on their prior personal knowledge and experiences with the individuals or community, such as Jessica agreeing with a parent who described a teacher as "*very cold and just doesn't care*" (*Thought Paper 2)* or Amanda commenting on a community member's "*raggedy appearance and rough mannerisms." (Thought Paper 2)*. However, this simple deficit discourse was not common across the residents' thought papers; instead, they either tended to take an inquiry stance or made negative judgments of those community members who were themselves judging others.

. When taking an inquiry stance, residents tended to engage in the same questioning that moved them away from simple, idyllic discourse. As illustrated above, Kristin engaged in an ongoing investigation questioning the developmental trajectory of SES mattering to children, including interviewing her own children of different ages about what they see among their classmates. Other residents used questioning very explicitly to stop themselves from taking a deficit stance. For example, Jessica states:

> *The way the grandmother was interacting with this little boy has me thinking a few different things. First off, what is this child going to be like when he enters school? . . . Second, is she fostering his creativity by feeding into him being a dinosaur?. . . If I had met her prior to this class and observed her interactions, I believe I would have thought differently about her, maybe making the judgment that she was not being hard enough on him or that she spoils him by letting him do whatever he wants. (Jessica, Thought Paper 3)*

The other way that residents resisted simple deficit discourse was when they engaged in what we referred to as "meta-judgment" or "judging the judgers." In these situations, the residents negatively judged individuals because those individuals were negatively judging others. Mary's complaint (shared previously) about a teacher needlessly criticizing students while at a lake is indicative of her judging educators whom they perceived as being overly critical of students. This meta-judging sometimes occurred when residents encountered community members exhibiting deficit discourse about poverty in the community. For example, in Kristin's investigation of views on SES, she encountered a landlord who believed "*some of his impoverished adult tenants manipulate the system to get out of working even going as far as getting a prescription for a 'working dog' to enhance their disability. . . . It appears that, by adulthood, the negative connotation surrounding poverty has been established*" *(Kristin, Thought Paper 2).*

Throughout these thought papers, the residents engaged in discussions of place as it is and place as it ought to be as well as navigating the tension that can arise between these two perceptions. As they described the rural communities they were situated, we identified different patterns in their discourse around strengths and challenges. While they engaged in idyllic and deficit discourses of rurality and place, the residents resisted dominant discourses by incorporating more nuanced discussions of the strengths and challenges they observed in these places. In this case, as residents resisted deficit and idyllic discourses of rurality and place, they inevitably moved toward alternative discourse. We identified several methods residents used to move away from these discourses; however, we hope future research can further explore the discourse(s) residents were moving toward.

Discussion

Building on the literature on rural teacher preparation (Azano & Stewart, 2016; Burkett & Gimbert, 2009; Islam, 2012; Kaden & Patterson, 2014; Kline & Walker-Gibbs, 2015; Lock, 2008; O'Neal et al., 2008), we were interested in how preservice teachers who had lived in and were embedded in rural communities navigated discourses of place and rurality while enrolled in the RTR program. This exploratory study examined how four rural-embedded residents engaged in their own discourses and broader discourses of place and rurality.

Overall, we found that residents engaged in their discourses of place and rurality and broader discourses of place and rurality as they came to know--or know more deeply or in a new way--specific rural places (Corbett, 2010). In particular, through thought papers, observations in the community, and community-based internships, the four residents navigated general understandings or ideas around what it means to know a place and specific references to individuals, organizations, and practices. In these instances, they moved back and forth between what "it ought to" mean to know a rural place, generally, and their understandings of "what is" a specific rural place. Additionally, they navigated between the challenges and strengths of rural communities. Specifically, the residents identified poverty conditions, limited resources, and disconnect between schools, home, and the broader community as challenges they perceived or observed. When residents identified strengths, they highlighted the strengths of the community (as a broader construct), resilience, organizations, and getting to know children and youth in and out of formal school settings.

There was some evidence of the residents' engagement with broader rural discourses, in particular idyllic and deficit-based discourses of rurality. This is not surprising, given broader representations of rurality and rural communities (Biddle & Azano, 2016). However, we also found evidence of resisting these broader discourses by asking questions of themselves or their inferences or through normative statements around the individual making potentially problematic statements. While limited, we view these examples as evidence of entry points for further work around how preservice

teachers may begin to unpack their observations and understanding of rural places beyond superficial or surface-level ideas.

Together, this study provides a lens into how the residents are understanding their roles as situated in specific rural communities. Furthermore, this study contributes to the literature on preservice teachers' discourses of place and rurality as they develop conceptual and practical tools to become high quality teachers in rural communities. Through our coding schema, we believe this study offers a nuanced framework for analyzing the specificity of place about individual and broader discourses of place and rurality.

Limitations

While we believe this study contributes to the literature on rural teacher education, focusing on preservice teachers' discourses of place and rurality, we also recognize the essential limitations of this exploratory research. We acknowledge that it is bounded by the specificity of the program (RTR), geographic and socio-political context (in our northeastern state), as well as the course assignment and stage of the program (introductory summer) from which the data was derived. As such, we do not claim to generalize how preservice teachers in other programs or contexts may engage with similar discourses. While students' thought papers yielded rich data, we recognize the limitations of course assignments and the potentially performative nature of preservice teachers' written work. Situating this inquiry at the beginning of the program limits our understanding of whether and how residents' discourses changed throughout the program and how they engaged in these discourses in their work in schools. We view these limitations as opportunities for further inquiry and research related to preservice teachers' discourses of and practices related to place and rurality in rural teacher preparation.

Implications

As noted, scholars have advocated for the centrality of place in the rural teacher education curriculum (e.g., Biddle & Azano, 2016; White & Reid, 2008). For example, as White and Reid (2008) suggest:

> Teachers who, over their careers, take up a rural placement need to be prepared for the unique features of living and working in a rural community—in particular, the need . . . to be acutely aware of and respond to community issues and the potential of place-based pedagogies for expanding the repertoire of practice available to [students] in rural schools. (p. 9)We see this study as one way of examining how preservice teachers make sense of the unique features of living and working in the rural communities where they will teach by analyzing their discourses of place and rurality.

We offer implications from this study for rural teacher preparation practice and research. As this study suggests, in the first summer of the RTR program, the preservice teachers demonstrated some evidence of resisting superficial or stereotypical discourses

of idyllic rural tropes or deficit-laden ideas about rurality. Building on existing literature, this study suggests that preservice teachers need multiple opportunities during teacher preparation to engage with rural schools and communities (e.g., Azano & Stewart, 2015) and unpack their discourses and broader discourses of rurality. Additionally, the four residents in this study had significant experience living and working in the rural region before enrolling in RTR. However, as we noted, despite having connections to and experience with rural communities, preservice teachers need structured opportunities in coursework, in schools, and in the community to question their taken-for-granted assumptions and understandings of the rural places in which they live and teach (Sommerville et al., 2010). Along these lines, teacher preparation should provide intentional opportunities and strategies for preservice teachers to push against and unpack superficial generalized understandings of rural places toward knowing the unique features of a specific rural place by taking on an ethnographic lens (Corbett, 2010; Reagan et al., 2019).

We call for multiple intentional opportunities for preservice teachers to name and describe their understanding of specific places and to unpack their normative assumptions around place and rurality. Specifically, teacher preparation programs should create opportunities for preservice teachers to ask questions such as: "What am I observing, and how does it connect to my understanding of a specific rural community? What makes this a strength (or challenge) of this specific rural community? Why do I believe this to be the case? And what evidence do I have to support this understanding? Or what evidence do I have that does not support this understanding? Finally, how does this understanding inform my work as a teacher?"

Further research is needed to explore the extent to which alternative discourses are associated with complex understandings of rural places, particularly how it manifests in schools and with students. We believe our coding schema and the use of State Space Grids can support future research on the extent to which these alternative discourses are associated with a more complex understanding of rural places. Building on this work, we recommend longitudinal research that follows preservice teachers through teacher preparation and into their first years of teaching to examine how discourses of place and rurality are presented and unpacked during teacher preparation across multiple settings (e.g., in coursework, schools, and community settings), and in the first years of teaching. As Anthony-Stevens and Langford (2020) argue, there is a "need not only for specific experiences in rurality to be analyzed, but their relationship to wider circulated stereotypes about rurality should be critiqued as well" (p. 10). Further research is needed to explore the curriculum of rural teacher preparation programs and how opportunities during teacher preparation shape or inform preservice teachers' understanding of place and rurality as it may ultimately enable teachers to expand opportunities for students, thus leading to sustaining rural schools and communities (Reid et al., 2010).

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