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Editorial: Elevating Voices within our Diverse Tapestry of Rurality

Arleth Medal, *Assistant Editor, TPRE*
Taylor Parrish*, Program Coordinator, Rural Education Institute*
Kristen Cuthrell*, Director, Rural Education Institute*
Jennifer Levi Williams, *Journal Manager, TPRE*

The publication of *Theory & Practice in Rural Education* enters its fifth year, marking a significant achievement. The editorial leadership feels privileged to collaborate with authors, reviewers, and readers to fulfill the journal's mission of publishing high-quality articles that address theoretical, empirical, and practical issues in rural education.

This research-oriented issue offers a diverse range of timely and critical topics explored by our authors. The breadth of manuscripts offer a collection of studies reflecting the diverse tapestry of stakeholders and resources in our rural schools and communities. Within the Research Forum, authors present qualitative and descriptive studies focused on areas such as perspectives of rural educators on teaching controversial texts, the visibility of Queerness in rural narratives with school-based implications, the perceptions of female superintendents serving in rural schools, the effects of distance learning on teachers in rural Title I schools, and the characteristics of students with cochlear implants and their implications on rural disproportionality. Additionally, the issue includes a book review of *Struggling to find our way: Rural educators' experiences working with and caring for Latinx students* by Stephanie Oudghiri.

TPRE is supported by ECU Library Services and the Rural Education Institute. All manuscripts undergo a double-blind review process, coordinated by the staff, including the Journal's Executive Editor, Journal Manager, Assistant Editors, Associate Editors, and Reviewers.

The publication of this issue would not have been possible without the continuous support of various individuals. Special recognition goes to Jennifer Levi Williams, the Journal Manager; Arleth Medal, the Assistant Editor; Dr. Robert Quinn, the Associate Editor for the Research Forum; Dr. Martin Reardon, the Associate Editor for the Practice Forum; Dr. Jan Lewis, the Director of J. Y. Joyner Library; Joseph Thomas, the Assistant Director for Collections and Scholarly Communication, Joyner Library; and Nick Crimi, the OJS Administration, Joyner Library. The journal extends its gratitude to the reviewers on the editorial board and the authors who have contributed their valuable work to this issue.

Looking ahead, the journal is currently accepting manuscripts for the next general issue, scheduled for publication in the spring as per tradition. Additionally, a guest-edited

special issues topic on trauma informed practices is being prepared for fall 2023. Scholars and practitioners in the field of rural education are invited to submit their work to the Research Forum, the Practice Forum, the Digital Projects Forum, or the Book Reviews Forum for 2024 issues. Manuscripts for general issues are typically due in the fall, with expected publication dates in May. Special issues topic manuscripts are typically due in late winter, with publication expected in the fall. Our Fall 2024 special issues topic is yet to be determined.

Those interested in participating as peer reviewers can register on the journal's website (http://tpre.ecu.edu). By editing their profile and navigating to the "Roles" tab, individuals can select "Reviewer" and specify their interests related to rural education. The journal is also seeking an Executive Editor to oversee the review, editing, and publishing process. The Executive Editor will serve as a leader and collaborative member of the TPRE team, with primary responsibilities including the initial manuscript review, providing authors with feedback in collaboration with section editors, and conducting the final proofread. Letters of interest should be addressed to Kristen Cuthrell, Interim Executive Editor, and Jenn Levi Williams, the Journal Manager, at tpre@ecu.edu

About the Authors

Arleth Medal, is a Graduate Assistant for the Rural Education Institute and Assistant Editor for the *Theory & Practice in Rural Education.* Currently, she is entering her second year in the Master's plus Specialist in School Psychology program at East Carolina University. She has extensive professional experience supporting individuals with developmental disabilities and behavioral challenges and aims to acquire knowledge in supporting the unique needs of students residing in Eastern North Carolina.

Taylor Parrish, is a Program Coordinator at East Carolina University in the Rural Education Institute. She is an ECU alumna with a Bachelor's in Education and has several years of teaching experience. Currently pursuing a Master's degree in Higher Education at Liberty University, she is dedicated to expanding her knowledge in the field. She has previous research experience in teacher recruitment and retention in rural North Carolina, and a wealth of expertise and passion to the field of rural education.

Kristen Cuthrell, EdD, is a Professor at East Carolina University in the Department of Elementary Education and Middle Grades Education and serves as Director of the Rural Education Institute. Her research interests include reform in educator preparation, innovation in clinical experiences, and professional development in rural schools.

Jennifer Levi Williams, MA, is an adjunct instructor and university supervisor in the College of Education at East Carolina University. She serves as the journal manager for the *Theory & Practice in Rural Education (TPRE).* Her education includes a bachelor's degree and a master's degree in Elementary Education from East Carolina University.

Jennifer also holds certifications in K-12 reading, and gifted education, and is Nationally Board Certified. Prior to her work at East Carolina University, Jennifer taught for ten years in public schools. She is currently pursuing a doctoral degree through the University of North Carolina at Wilmington in Curriculum and Instruction. Her research interests include challenges and opportunities in rural education, educational policy, international and comparative education, gifted education, and technology in education.

Mission: Initiate and facilitate partnerships and research-driven innovations that enhance holistic development and opportunities for pk-16 students and their families in rural communities. Collaborate with stakeholders towards positive transformation in families and schools.

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Teaching with Controversial Texts in Rural School Settings

Linda Gray Smith, *Northwest Missouri State University*

Victoria N. Seeger, *Northwest Missouri State University*

The study examines data from surveys and interviews with educators in rural school settings in the Midwest and their use of texts that are deemed controversial for middle and high school students. Qualitative research was conducted with research participants to document how they defined controversial literature, how they used the literature in their school settings, and how they navigated opportunities and challenges for themselves and their students. Extensive quotations from the research participants are used to demonstrate how they define controversial texts, how they use strong pedagogical processes to assist students in learning about specific topics, and why they continue to teach using controversial literature. In the process of conducting the research, the investigators learned about how voice and choice are used with students for book selection and research topics to assist students in examining topics that can be viewed as controversial. While acknowledging that some texts could not be used for direct instruction in their setting, each of the research participants believed it was their responsibility to continue using most of the titles of texts cited, assisting students as they researched thought-provoking topics, and discussing the content in order for students to learn the most possible about races, cultures, ethnicities, and other sometimes controversial topics. The educators' thinking about the research topic and its importance for "growing good humans" is a critical construct stemming from the study.

***Keywords*: rural education, controversial literature, English language arts, inclusive pedagogy**

Impetus for the Research

Our story is not *why* teachers should teach literature that has been deemed controversial by some individuals; our story is that teachers in small school districts in rural areas, without the benefit of language arts department chairs or district-provided staff development focusing on strategies for teaching texts that are at times controversial,

do teach such texts. Teachers make the choice of how they will teach these texts, and many times in rural districts, they select the literature their students will read, discuss, and react to.

As readers of applications for Regional Teacher of the Year, we noted those individual English teachers from rural districts who were engaged in teaching controversial literature and helping their students learn about cultural differences. Our search was to find other teachers in a three-state area who also made the decision to teach such literature to study why they taught such literature, what training they did or did not receive in teaching such literature, what instructional strategies they used, and what support they did or did not receive from their communities and administration. English language arts teachers were studied as compared to other content area teachers because they are expected to use literature on a daily basis with their students.

Zimmerman and Robertson (2017a) suggest that "discussions or controversial issues develops both intellectual and civic virtues" (p. 59). Others suggest that democracies require its members to be able to engage others in discussions where there are varying viewpoints (Gallagher et al., 2021). Discussion of controversial issues helps students develop an array of skills. The teachers in this study teach literature that has been labeled by some as banned or controversial. They do not teach it as an "open" controversy. They teach it as opportunity for students to learn beyond themselves and their communities. As one of our participants stated, "students need to understand the past so history does not repeat itself."

Important Role of Teachers

Teachers make hundreds of decisions each day; they determine strategies they will use in instruction, materials they will use in meeting district-identified objectives, and methodology to support the individual students in their classrooms. As professionals, teachers are tasked with "preparing all students for equitable participation in a democratic society" (Bransford et al, 2005, p. 11). Freire wrote of the importance of education where students have opportunities to question and think critically. In the introduction to Freire's text, Giroux uses the phrase "lived realities of various societies" to capture Freire's intent (Freire, 1985, p. xiii). Similarly, Niño and Perez-Diaz (2021) write of educators in Southwest Texas rural schools who are in roles to "influence the political and social change we want" (p. 91). Allowing students in primarily white schools to learn of practices that are different than their own creates an environment where new understanding can grow. The effect of rural teachers on their students' education is magnified because low student enrollment necessitates the teacher frequently teaching the same students for multiple years. A 1950 study of American Schools indicated the community's faith in its teachers was considered the linchpin to success in teaching controversial topics (Corbett, 1950). In rural districts where there may be English departments with one to two teachers responsible for 6th through 8th grade students or 9th through 12th grade students,

community “faith” in those teachers makes a difference in how much they safely can venture into helping their students understand controversial topics.

Some Background about the Use of Controversial Literature in Rural Settings

The research focused on using controversial literature in the instruction of middle and high school students in rural school settings. Controversial is an interesting word to define properly. For the purpose of this research the authors deemed controversial literature to be any text (book or otherwise) that raised concerns by families, students, administration, boards of education, or was a concern for the teachers using the text with students. Zimmerman and Robertson (2017b) acknowledge that teachers have been “barred from assigning *The Catcher in the Rye, The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn,* or other so-called banned books” (p. 12), and teachers have taught literature and concepts that have at times been deemed controversial. In fact, Zimmerman and Robertson (2017b) assert educators may “overestimate the constraints on addressing controversial topics in their classrooms” (p. 13).

The literature is clear that defining rural and rural education is complicated because every rural setting is unique, made so by the history of the people who settled there as well as mobility, poverty, politics, proximity to larger cities, how the land is used, and who resides there now (Kettler et al., 2016). Because the sampling for this research was purposeful, the rural school settings discussed crossed three midwestern states, some near metropolitan areas, some not.

The Current Study

The research included surveying 11 participants and conducting follow-up interviews with six of those individuals. Each was a practicing secondary (middle school and high school) educator. Additionally, two administrators, at the building level, were surveyed. All participants were asked about their experiences teaching public school students using literature that could be considered controversial in content related to race, ethnicity, gender, or any other topic identified by the teachers surveyed. The focus of the study was middle and high school educators teaching in rural settings in Missouri, Iowa, and Kansas. The administrators in those settings were surveyed to better understand how support was provided to literacy educators for using texts labeled as controversial in content when concerns were raised by the public. The researchers believe it is vital that issues related to teaching about these topics be examined related to narrowing curriculum, potential book banning, and educators who feel safe teaching in their school setting to use literature to meet the needs of all students. Their sense of urgency about this topic was confirmed by one participant who emailed prior to her interview saying, “I am glad someone is willing to measure this difficult and controversial topic. This is not light work, I am sure. Thank you again for your research and willingness to listen.”

Literature Review

Defining The Term Controversial

What is controversial may be a bit like Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart's threshold test for obscenity, "I know it when I see it" (Jacobellis v. Ohio, 1964), because it is based on perspectives of individuals and the collective mind of a community. Gladwell (2000) writes of tipping points when a significant number in a society accept a concept as reality—no longer one with multiple viewpoints, no longer something to be debated. Zimmerman and Robertson (2017a) suggest controversial subjects are topics on which there is disagreement, individuals who are "fairly" competent with knowledge of the subject are in disagreement, a reasonable case can be made for more than one side of the argument, and there is an emotional investment in the subject that are matters of public concern. Hess applies the concept to controversial topics where concepts are open to more than one perspective and noncontroversial topics are closed to more than one perspective while controversial topics are those for which there are multiple viewpoints (Camicia, 2008; Gallagher et al., 2021).

Gallagher et al. (2021) define open controversy as an issue that has multiple and competing viewpoints in the public's eye. The curriculum reflects these tipping points by the degree to which students are encouraged to express varying perspectives. When there is agreement, without varying perspectives, the issues are closed and "are tipped" to being non-controversial while issues in which individuals en masse hold varying perspectives "are tipped" toward being controversial or open to multiple perspectives (Camicia, 2008). When society reaches a tipping point with an issue, curriculum follows with the inclusion of specific issues as closed (non-controversial) or as open (controversial). The researchers believe that when it comes to texts used in educational settings, there are many stakeholders' views that are often shared in public ways influencing whether the text is viewed as non-controversial or controversial.

In addition, topics that may have been viewed as closed in other times and locations may now be considered open. An episode of *This American Life*, which aired January 7, 2022 and was hosted by Emanuele Berry, tells of Dr. Whitfield, a new high school principal, who sent an email to parents and teachers in his district in reaction to the murder of George Floyd expressing his optimism in the national renouncement of racism (Berry, 2022). At that time Dr. Whitfield received support from parents and teachers only to have the same email used as a reason to remove him from his principalship ten months later. What was earlier viewed as closed, non-controversial with one accepted perspective, in the community was opened as controversial, with multiple perspectives, later in the year. In another example, a Florida social studies teacher who believed slavery in the United States was a closed issue found some of her students believed slavery is an open issue to be debated and viewed many of her students as racists (Washington & Humphries, 2011). It appears the distinction between closed issues

and open issues (therefore controversial) is dependent on time and place. What may be a closed issue in one location may be an open issue in another; what may be closed at one time may be an open issue in an earlier or a later time.

The decisions teachers make regarding instructional materials and the stating of their viewpoint is not without peril. In a 2010 survey of social studies teachers, 95% indicated they did teach controversial topics, and 47% indicated they taught such topics weekly. However, 33% of those surveyed also indicated they had come under pressure from administrators and parents to lessen conversations on controversial topics such as sex, gay rights, and religion (Zimmerman & Robertson, 2017a).

After the federal appeals court refused to review the case *Mayer v. Monroe* (2007) regarding a teacher's dismissal because she informed her students that she did not support the 2003 American invasion of Iraq, an attorney for the National Education Association warned that the courts have not guaranteed academic freedom for K-12 teachers. "The First Amendment does not entitle primary and secondary teachers, when conducting the education of captive audiences to cover topics, or advocate viewpoints, that depart from the curriculum adopted by the school system" (Walsh, 2007, para. 11).

Marriott (2022), an attorney for a Midwest school district, describes in detail what is occurring in classrooms, schools, and districts across the country and notes what is recommended for teachers dealing with situations where texts are challenged:

> Over the past couple of years, there has been an increase in issues related to teachers either using controversial terms or racial slurs or epithets. Those issues have received increased media coverage and coincide with a push from interest groups and parent groups actively lobbying against diversity, equity, and inclusion work in schools. This friction has resulted in many districts across the state, both rural and metropolitan, receiving numerous and broad open records requests for instructional materials, specific staff member information, lesson plans, communications, and in some instances leading to public attacks on individual educators. Out of this dynamic, there are specific instances such as teachers reading *Of Mice and Men*, *Huckleberry Finn*, or *To Kill a Mockingbird*, all of which have racial slurs, being accused of discrimination or harassment. Our recommendation to districts has been for building principals to proactively talk to teachers and express that if their lessons or texts go near issues of race, gender, or controversial issues in general, that the teachers should talk to their principal in advance to come up with a game plan. Educators need to understand this hypersensitive environment and develop an approach in advance (personal communication, November 2, 2022).

In a recent publication, the Brookings Institution discussed a study of over 3,700 Americans regarding controversial topics (Saavedra et al., 2022). The majority of those participating in the study want K-12 students to have exposure to controversial topics from

multiple points of view to hone critical thinking skills and assist students in understanding how to be involved in civics. The authors' concluding statement is this one:

> Though there will be disagreements about how to teach controversial topics, outright bans like those considered and required through current legislation seem misaligned with the public's desires. We need good civic education to preserve and strengthen democracy, and the American people recognize this (Saavedra et al., 2022, para. 16).

Rural Spaces

Rural locations are unique, geographically isolated from large population bases, and "often associated with country life, small communities, and restricted access to resources" (Kettler et al., 2016, p. 247). The United States Department of Education (USDE) defines rural in three categories: fringe, distant, and remote (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2022). Fringe is considered to be rural spaces that are five miles or less from an urban area. Distant spaces are more than five to 25 miles from an urban setting "as well as rural territory." Remote is considered to be more than 25 miles from an urban area or more than ten miles from an urban cluster. Both the categories of distant and remote use the census to assist in defining those spaces. A summary definition might be that rural locations are unique from community to community (Walker, 2021).

Related to education, specifically, the literature that informs defining rural tackles the issues of rural poverty and equity in educational spaces. There is less access to materials and individuals who wish to teach in those settings (Gallagher et al., 2021). Equity in education has been a growing concern in rural communities for some time. "The conditions of inequity result in areas too poor to shoulder the heavy burden of providing a first-class education to their children. Rural taxpayers, in impoverished areas, are required to dig deeper to maintain a semblance of modern education" (p. 4) asserts Rinehart (2016) in a study of rural education. Strange (2011) addresses the dispersion of students in rural school settings and notes, "Dispersion and poverty are two of the most virile enemies of political power, and where they coincide, they leave in their wake some of the most meagerly funded schools in America" (para. 8). Strange (2011) notes the difficulties in attracting teachers to rural areas when those small rural towns may be viewed as a "low-wealth rural community with limited amenities, poor housing, and few college-educated peers, and keeping that teacher beyond the first beckoning from a better situation district, is daunting" (para. 34). While many times rural communities are seen as "less than" in terms of economic vitality, cultural experiences, and social diversity (Corbett & Donehower, 2017), rural communities do have strengths and assets. Heller (2021) acknowledges many rural educators have ties to the communities and teach because of a commitment to education as well as knowing that teaching positions are stable jobs with a contracted pay and benefits. Many times, the teaching force in rural

settings includes individuals who have invested in the community for a number of years. Rinehart (2016) views this differently. He notes

> The flight of top teaching talent to the suburbs certainly affects rural schools, as anyone who has been an administrator in such a school can attest. This phenomenon is tantamount to a rural community losing the town doctor, pharmacist, or veterinarian. Sometimes talented people simply cannot be replaced once they leave. Teachers are often replaced physically, if their talents are possibly unrealized by less gifted successors (p. 13).

In school settings across the country, the "student population has become increasingly segregated" (Hambacher & Ginn, 2021, p. 300) as political initiatives have failed to integrate schools, and the teaching force, even for students of color, is dominated by white teachers. This is further compounded in rural school districts where not only the teacher workforce is dominated by white individuals, but the students attending those schools are also largely white. While rural districts may not have a great deal of diversity in terms of race, ethnicity, or culture, there are commonalities in the schools that students attend. All the students in the rural community likely attend class in the same elementary, middle school, and high school. Because of the size of the communities, students and their families know each other, and there likely are more personal interactions with individuals with differing viewpoints. Many times, families have lived in the community for multiple generations resulting in long-term relationships. In Heller's (2021) interview with Sky Marietta, she notes that in rural communities, the people in those communities talk to one another even when they may have varying viewpoints and opinions about politically charged issues. Zimmerman and Robertson (2017a) suggest teachers use their knowledge of their students in the determination of which materials are too controversial to be taught in the setting. Teachers' "knowledge of their students and communities . . . [to] identify which maximally controversial issues would be most fruitful to explore" (Kuntzman, 2018, p. 4) with their students, values teacher judgment.

Culturally Relevant and Responsive Pedagogy

Researchers Hambacher and Ginn (2021) noted "the necessity and particular complexities of preparing white teachers to address race and racism in predominantly white school communities remains largely unstudied" (p. 338). Thus, it would be logical and reflective of our experiences and views that there appears to be a lack of preparation for teachers to be able to facilitate conversations on topics that are controversial (Washington & Humphries, 2011; Zimmerman & Robertson, 2017a), leaving teachers to make the choices of topics to include in classroom discussion. Those choices can be difficult as educators consider job security and the roles they may play in the communities where they live (Gallagher et al., 2021). The issue surrounding pedagogical practices are further compounded by classroom educators concerned about social justice issues who maintain "that teacher education and professional development programs that ignore the

role of whiteness in the maintenance of oppressive systems perpetuate unjust practices that harm students of color while elevating white identities in the curriculum and within school communities" (Hambacher & Ginn, 2021, p. 329).

Consideration of types of classroom discussions that include information seeking, persuasion, negotiation, inquiry, deliberation, and dialogue to air grievances are supported by Gregory (2014) while Zimmerman and Robertson (2017a) suggest that teachers model debate in ways that are not polarizing. In addition, teachers who self-identified as critical thinkers are more likely to address controversial topics in their classrooms than those who do not consider themselves critical thinkers (Sari, 2019).

Kelly-Howard (2021) writes, "The numerous cultural experiences in a single teacher's classroom present the teacher with the responsibility of implementing pedagogical practices that celebrate and amplify students' unique cultural experiences" (p. 51). Often in small rural communities, the cultural experiences represented by the students in the classroom are largely limited to the history of the place. However, some industrial endeavors often near these areas, that is, meatpacking plants, have changed the landscape of these communities. When that is true, it becomes the language arts educators' (and other educators as well) responsibility to teach with literature representing the population living in the area and the students. More importantly, the students in rural communities need and deserve to learn about cultures other than their own. Kelly-Howard (2021) reported on a study conducted by the International Literacy Association relative to elementary school settings that demonstrates "the need for providing students with access to diverse texts in order to evaluate representations of diversity, culture, and injustices through culturally sustaining pedagogies" (p. 51). Additionally, literacy educators need "to make visible the best practices in using diverse and multicultural literature" (Kelly-Howard, 2021, p. 51).

Controversial Literature

We know that, every day, students in classrooms across our country are exposed to news stories about controversial issues surrounding social justice from politically charged news sources often reflecting the values of families and community. As a result, classroom texts are being challenged by members of the public regarding their suitability for students in areas such as race, ethnicity, and gender identification. Those challenges have led to administration and school board involvement in making decisions about the literature available to students in literacy classes and in school libraries; in addition, there has been pushback by families and students. In a recent news post from Ankeny, Iowa, high school students expressed their concern at a school board meeting as they "voice[d] their support for literature that represents diverse identities and viewpoints that have come under fire from conservative activists in recent months" (Hytrek, 2021, para. 1). Students are using their voices via social media, school board meetings, and news sources to express themselves when it comes to equity and inclusion.

Prior to agreeing to be a part of this research study, and completing the survey and interview for the study, one research participant was interviewed by a reporter from a local newspaper about her attempt to add culturally responsive literature to what she teaches in her high school English classes. The school district is adjacent to a Native American reservation, so many of the students attending the school district are residents on the reservation. The district has worked with tribal leaders to make certain that Native culture is a part of the school's curriculum. However, this teacher was puzzled by the lack of literature being used to teach about Native culture. She developed a specific curriculum that encompassed literature featuring Native Americans from the United States but also from New Zealand, Canada, and other countries. She developed a final project that students completed on a topic they chose "related to indigenous culture and history" (Bahl & Garcia, 2022, para. 59). This teacher is now wondering if what has been constructed and implemented will impact the Native American students' views of themselves and then whether factors such as graduation rates and attendance for Native students will be impacted by the content of the class.

Theoretical Frameworks

Educator Agency and Self-Efficacy

The self-efficacy of teachers is a theoretical underpinning of this research. According to Johnston (2004), central to developing a sense of self-efficacy is agency. Agency is a fundamental human desire resulting in intentional acts using will, drive, and determination (Bandura, 1997; Pajares, 2008). While Bandura (2000) discusses how the environment impacts performance outcomes, Karnopp (2022) found the self-efficacy of rural educators to be of significance. Karnopp examined the behaviors of teachers in a rural school who were faced with new instructional practices as a result of a district initiative. Generally, rural districts do not have the depth of support for professional development that larger districts have, nor do they have instructional coaches or defined curriculum guides specifying the texts to be used across grade levels. For example, in many rural districts there may be one teacher who is responsible for teaching every section of American literature. In short, there are challenges providing resources and expertise to support instructor learning (Karnopp, 2022). Indeed, Karnopp's research revealed that when limited in-district support systems were in place, the agency of the individual educator enabled learning of skills because personal interest motivated the teacher's learning. As a result, teachers invested their personal time so as to increase the knowledge base for and the planning of instruction. Guthrie and Knowles (2001) describe self-efficacy as the "belief that 'I can do it'" (p. 163), and these rural teachers did just that.

Inclusive Pedagogy

Inclusive pedagogy defined in Ladson-Billings' (1995) work includes a focus on each student to attain academic success and empathy for diversity in social justice pedagogy. Educators consider each student's learning style as a foundation for

instruction as well as the language spoken in the students' home and the emotional needs of the student (Ladson-Billings, 1995). When Ladson-Billings (1995) writes of "good teaching," there is a focus on academic success, cultural integrity, and critical consciousness for each student. With an emphasis on skills necessary to participate in a democracy (i.e., literacy, numeracy, technology, social, and political), students have the foundation for success. Culturally relevant teaching is founded in the culture of the students as the "vehicle for learning" (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 161). Music, art, and technology that students are familiar with can be used in teaching academic concepts. Ladson-Billings (1995) asks, "If school is about preparing students for active citizenship, what better citizenship tool than the ability to critically analyze the society?" (p. 162). Critical consciousness creates opportunities to question inequities and to take action to make changes given culturally relevant pedagogy. Niño and Perez-Diaz (2021) describe intentional classroom communities where teachers and leaders found classroom decisions on inclusivity, equity, and empathy. Those decisions result in actions meaning "an educator cannot simply identify as a social justice advocate but must be willing to fulfill this role through actions" (Niño & Perez-Diaz, 2021, p. 89).

Researcher Positionality

As authors, both researchers have taught and served as building leaders in rural school districts in the states where the study is focused. One served as an elementary teacher (including teaching sixth grade) and one as a secondary English teacher. One researcher has served as a building leader and school district superintendent in two of the states. The other researcher was an instructional coach for five years in four elementary schools and consulted at the middle and high school for the district. The initial concept for the study sprung from serving as Regional Teacher of the Year selection team members. The work the teachers were doing in rural schools was gutsy in the current political climate. In addition, one of the researchers' children are students of color in a predominately white student body in the small rural school district where they attended and graduated.

Methodology

The researchers were aware of how critical it would be to describe the context of the research in great detail and provide readers with reasoning for any implications and assertions made about rural school settings, teaching in rural schools, and how literature that is described as controversial was used in those settings (Coladarci, 2007). Defining what rural encompasses is difficult, not just for educators and educational researchers, but also complicated because of variances in how rural is defined and described by federal and state agencies (Swain & Baker, 2021). Swain and Baker (2021) note, "All these factors challenge the ways rural educational scholars articulate, ignore, or address race in rural education" (p. 17). The researchers determined it was critical to understand the settings of each of the educators in the study while also protecting their anonymity in

the writing. For these reasons, a qualitative case study approach was utilized by the researchers, an appropriate one as noted by Creswell and Poth (2018), “when we want to empower individuals to share their stories, hear their voices” (p. 45).

In addition to examining how literacy educators were using controversial literature, research interview questions (see Appendix B) asked educators about their pre-service teacher preparation training, professional development, and personal professional learning regarding teaching controversial topics in their predominantly white rural schools. Interview questions were designed to find out about the challenges faced in regard to teaching literature that involved controversial topics in predominantly white rural settings, and the strategies the teachers found effective in such instruction. The teachers’ view of the support received from school administrators was also examined.

The role of school administrators in supporting these teachers was considered to be a critical element of the research. School and district level administrators were asked to participate in the research for their views on how they or the school district provided administrative support to the educators and how professional development was provided to the literacy teachers. Only two administrators who were approached to be a part of the research responded to the request to complete a survey, and those administrators elected to not participate in follow-up interviews.

The researchers believe that examining the rich collection of data resulted in a qualitative case study addressing a critical education topic that is politically and educationally important at this time. Individually the researchers reviewed the transcribed interviews, identified relevant data to the purpose of the study, and determined themes gleaned from the data. The coded data were then placed in a document with the direct quotations identified based on the code themes.

Research Participants

Research participants were recruited using connections to professional teaching organizations and the researchers’ relationships with rural school educators in three midwestern states. The recruitment was completed through an email that contained a consent form for those that agreed to participate in the study. Ten classroom teachers and an instructional coach responded and completed the consent form; two administrators responded and completed the consent form. In mid-February 2022, an online survey (see Appendix A) using Google survey tools was sent to these participants. Of those 13 participants, six agreed to be individually interviewed for the research. The follow-up interviews were conducted one-on-one with the researchers; each researcher completed three individual interviews. The interviews were conducted using Zoom during March 2022. Of those interviewed individually, one was a former English teacher [now serving as an instructional coach in the district where they had taught], and others were English–Language Arts teachers in high school settings from three midwestern states.

Data Sources

Survey

An initial survey was sent to 49 rural educators; 11 responded to the survey. This survey allowed research participants to identify any text used in their classrooms that had the potential to be viewed as controversial or texts that raised concerns by others inside and outside the school setting. Ten administrators were asked to complete a survey; two responded. Thirteen educators completed the initial survey including classroom teachers, one instructional coach, and two administrators.

Appendix C lists the texts and other resources participants have used deemed controversial that were noted by the survey completers. The number next to the text shows how many times the text was cited. A question asked about who, specifically, had registered concerns about texts being taught; the responses are shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Survey Responses: Who Is Concerned about Texts

Students - 3
Building Administrator(s) - 1
Parents/Caregivers - 4
Paraeducator - 1
Teachers - 1
None - 2

Participant Interviews

As part of the initial survey, those completing the survey were asked if they would be willing to participate in a follow-up interview. All of those that agreed (that is, six participants) completed individual interviews with the researchers. The interviews were conducted using Zoom as participants were located in rural areas across three states. The follow-up interviews consisted of asking the participants 17 questions about how they define terms, their experiences using literature deemed to be controversial, teacher preparation and professional learning related to the controversial training, support received by administrators, and community and student responses. Interviews were 30 to 45 minutes in length.

Data Analysis

The researchers used qualitative methods to examine how rural educators used texts often deemed as controversial in their school settings. Marshall and Rossman (1999) note that case study design is used when researchers want to "chronicle events" (p. 44), and for this study, the researchers were concerned with accurately documenting how educators teach using specific kinds of texts in rural schools. Creswell and Poth (2018) write that case study design can be used to understand research issues as the researchers discover themes and then make assertions based on the themes found in the data.

The researchers analyzed and coded the survey results and interview transcripts separately and repeatedly, each discovering themes. Coding results were then compared and discussed, resulting in identified themes supported by the words of the research participants. Extensive quotations from the educators were used to illustrate the themes that were discovered.

Findings

Note: All names used are pseudonyms.

Defining Controversial Topics

When asked to define the term "controversial topics," one research participant, Ella, captured the three themes that emerged in the other participants' responses: (a) different viewpoints on a topic, (b) the topics divide people, and (c) individuals respond emotionally to the topic.

Lori discussed that what she has often not considered controversial ends up being controversial and framed that within the context of teaching in a rural location. She noted, topics become controversial when "students . . . think I am advocating a different view than they hold." Clay was specific about the issues that he has considered to be controversial including something that is sexual, race or gender issues, and "sometimes political issues."

Suzanne recognized that controversy can occur around lots of topics, not just the focus of this research, including sports. However, she noted that controversy can be "big" such as "social justice and other societal norm issues." She further explains her personal view as "just anytime it pushes a viewpoint to a boundary."

Related to emotions that surface when teaching with controversial texts or topics, Amelia defined controversial topics "as anything that would stir up emotional responses in any of the people involved, particularly topics that are heavily covered and/or other media outlets and social media."

Defining Rural

The research participants defined rural through four themes in their responses: (a) distance of the rural location from a city, (b) agricultural terms, (c) the population of the area, and (d) characteristics of the people living in a rural area. While the responses varied related to using geographical distance terms, this was the most common way for participants to define rural. This certainly speaks to each participant's own experiences of where their school setting is located and even where a person is living. "Ten miles outside of a city," "two hours from anywhere," "an hour and a half from any major city," and "have to drive 30 minutes to get to a Walmart" are a sampling of responses that referred to distances from city, suburban, or urban areas.

Using agricultural terms to define rural appeared in four of the six participants' responses. One statement was tongue in cheek, saying, "If you can hear cows outside the building, you know you're in a rural school." Two responses directly referred to farming as a descriptor for living in a rural setting.

The population of the rural setting was also discussed by the participants. They noted that the rural areas where they teach do not have a large population. One participant said that the population was "less dense." Conversely, Karla, who has lived in a suburb of a large southern city noted that even though the suburb where she grew up was largely rural as a setting, the population there was increasing. She noted, "you can be living in a rural area, but still not be living a rural life." This was *not* how the other participants described midwestern rural settings.

Finally, the participants used descriptors of the people living in the settings to describe rural. They noted that experiences were limited for the people living in rural settings and one person was explicit stating, "a lack of opportunity, a lack of difference, a lack of experiences." Another noted that there were fewer families of color. Karla noted, "for [the] middle and high [schools], there was zero diversity in that school system" and that the elementary school was more diverse because of foster families in their school district. One participant used very specific language about their setting noting that the "demographics gear toward the WASP or Catholic" residents of the area. This comment reminded the researchers of how many rural communities still mirror the population that originally settled the area.

Connection to Social Studies

Recently, a post by an elementary teacher on social media highlighted how difficult teaching certain topics has become, especially themes related to the history of European influences in the United States, white settlers on the land of indigenous people, and slavery. This teacher was requesting that families discuss these topics at home because they were not comfortable discussing them in the classroom, saying that the students had lots of questions for which answers were "tricky."

This social media post demonstrated the importance of a theme that surfaced while coding the data: how often the English/Language Arts teachers were also social studies teachers. All of the participants, without explicitly stating it, are teaching social studies topics through American literature. Because of the texts and other resources used, social studies topics were woven into nearly every controversial topic that was discussed. This was discussed again and again as participants cited texts they used and how they support students' understanding of an era, or laws, or people and cultures, specific to American history. To assist students in further understanding controversy related to these topics, the teachers had the students conduct guided research on topics such as the Ku Klux Klan, Billie Holiday, or the Harlem Renaissance, for example. Outside resources used (beyond the texts themselves) included TED Talks, websites such as history.com and biography.com, interviews from the National Archives, news outlets, and primary sources. When discussing how they approach teaching about Native American literature, Suzannah noted, "I personally cannot dive into colonialism and to the settlers without really naming the elephant in the room . . . so I start off saying I recognize that the history in America can be very ugly and it's really important that we read these things."

Controversial Texts

As discussed, texts deemed controversial by some are at the heart of this research. As Suzannah remarks, "American literature *is* controversial." Not surprisingly, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (Twain, 1885) and *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Lee, 1960) are mentioned often in the interviews. While written long ago, the content of these texts is still marked as having content that some do not agree with, especially when used in school settings, because they include topics like race, class, poverty, and, to a lesser degree, sex. Other historic literature that research participants discussed included Langston Hughes poetry, *Of Mice and Men* (Steinbeck, 1937), *Inherit the Wind* (Lawrence & Lee, 1955), *The Great Gatsby* (Fitzgerald, 1925), and *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* (Taylor, 1976).

With the exception of one interview, the topic of literature focused on LGBTQIA+ content was brought up by the researchers. Prior to asking about the use of literature on these topics, the participants only discussed literature related to race, ethnicity, and culture. However, contemporary literature about this content was then discussed in detail by the teachers. These are topics that the participants clearly were hesitant about teaching, and in two of the interviews, the participants said they could not bring these topics up in their classrooms. *The Hate U Give* (Thomas, 2017), *All Boys Aren't Blue* (Johnson, 2020), and *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-time Indian* (Alexie, 2007) are discussed specifically. *The Hate U Give* is described by the American Library Association (2021) as having been banned and/or challenged "for profanity, violence, and because it was thought to promote an anti-police message and indoctrination of a social agenda" (para. 3). Suzannah uses this text with her AP English students but does not start the

reading of the text with any specific discussion about it other than telling them about the overall topic of the text. Amelia was prepared to use the text with her students, had ordered a literature set, and wrote lesson plans to use the book. “Then something happened in a different classroom that shouldn’t have happened . . . It was right after the insurrection . . . I was basically told [by her administrator], ‘I wouldn’t do that novel if I were you, because I don't know if I can back you up.’” Amelia accommodated by showing the movie and having students read the text and then compared the two. It was a safer alternative but did not allow for examining the text in a deep way.

All Boys Aren’t Blue (Johnson, 2020) garnered a very specific reaction from Amelia, as well. The American Library Association (2021) describes this book as being banned and/or challenged “for LGBTQIA+ content, profanity, and because it was considered to be sexually explicit” (para. 3). Amelia stated, “I think I’ve also been pleasantly surprised in certain situations where I had assumed that kids would think one way or another, but I know that I couldn’t address *All Boys Aren’t Blue* (Johnson, 2020). In fact, I chose not to put that book in my classroom library” because the book had been challenged in a nearby city (not a rural community). She continues, “even just having it in my classroom library is a concern” and ends her discussion of the book by saying, “Yeah, there’s no way.”

Teaching Can Be Scary

One of the interview questions asked participants to respond to a question, “Have you experienced any threatening behaviors related to challenged literature in your setting?” While all of the participants said that they had not, they did discuss their feelings about fears they may have had prior to this question being asked. In direct response to this interview question, Karla said she has had no direct threats, but “I feel here I’m just always walking around with a target on my back.” Amelia noted, “I have had students, parents who have accused me of giving them bad grades on things, on argumentative essays and things just because I disagreed with them when it wasn’t even really the case,” even though Amelia was preparing students for a specific curricular standard. She has also recently avoided a topic related to civil disobedience saying, “I didn’t feel comfortable doing that last year, so I just didn’t. I just didn’t.” Later in the interview, Amelia shared that she is moving to a larger district. When she told her principal she was leaving, she said to him, “I am scared to death every day that I’m going to say something or teaching something in my classroom that’s going to get me fired because it’s the wrong thing.” She believes that she will have added support in a larger district, “a little bit more protection,” and noted, “I’d actually even considered getting out of education all together.”

Clay’s interview responses discussed the advantage of experience when it comes to teaching controversial topics through literature. Because he has been in the district a number of years, is well known in the town and district, and is a respected teacher, he does not get as much pushback from parents as early educators do. He discussed a “new

to this community" science teacher who received complaints about science topics she was teaching that were possibly "contrary to religious beliefs." He said, "I think more of it stems from being new to this community." He discussed this again later sharing that all of the English teachers have many years of experience noting, "that gives us an advantage that other communities, where the English teachers may be unknown and new" whereas someone new coming to the community "nobody knows you or your family, and therefore you're more suspect from the beginning."

Suzanne discussed that she has experienced the difficulties she has had with white students versus students of color. She said that she feels like she has to "walk on eggshells with some of my, to be honest, more with my white students than I do with any of the students of color" and followed up saying she worries about saying the wrong thing to those students that would cause a problem for her.

A topic that some of the interviewees felt would receive the most pushback from students and parents was using literature about topics related to LGBTQIA+. Ella said that while the community was generally supportive when she teaches about race, "I also think if I were to teach something about the LGBT community, that would get a lot more pushback from this particular community, because they're very Christian in their religion."

Administrative Support

Having administrative support at the building and district levels is critical for teachers, no matter the setting of the school. It is probably safe to say that every teacher relies on that support at some point in their educational career. While feeling supported at the building level, the participants' principals knew there was a limit to how much support they could actually provide. When teaching topics or using literature that may be controversial, Amelia lets her administrator know what she is doing in the classroom in an effort to "try to head it off before it happens." Karla used the old adage, "I'm all about ask for forgiveness, not permission." However, as noted earlier, Karla is leaving the current rural district where she taught to teach in a larger nearby city where she feels she would have more support.

Pedagogical Shields

The classroom teachers use best pedagogical practices to get their students to dig deeper into controversial issues. In that way, the students are discovering what the issues are and how society has responded to those issues. While analyzing the interviews, the researchers found that participants consistently noted three ways that they use best practices when teaching with controversial texts: 1) letting the literature speak to the students; 2) having students conduct research about topics presented in the texts; and 3) using discussion strategies that allow for civil discourse.

The research participants, while committed to continuing using literature having controversy at their core, facilitated reading of the texts so that students discovered the

meaning within those texts as a result. Amelia said that she will use outside resources to help support reading the texts with her students rather than develop her own materials, calling that a “safety net.” She also noted that texts that are deemed to be canonical, she does not have to “worry about . . . it’s accepted.” Lori lets her students determine when a book is right for them saying, “I always tell my students if you're 30 pages into a book and you've already decided that this is not for you, you have 59 other choices. Nobody is making you read this book. This is certainly your choice.” Voice and choice about texts to be read and student-conducted research topics was discussed by three participants.

Student Research

Having students conduct research about topics related to the literature was a strategy the teachers used to avoid explicitly teaching the topics, but, at the same time, allowing students the opportunity to learn more about a given topic. Karla said she gives her students a few topics and a five-minute Google search on the topics to see what they can find out in a short amount of time. This pedagogical strategy allows the students to list what they are discovering so students then spend a lengthier time doing a deeper dive into a topic. She recently framed this within teaching students how to find important or interesting facts using an article about the Ku Klux Klan from history.com. The students “read with a partner, identify important facts using highlighting, and things like that. What they thought was most important or what they had never known, and they really didn’t know much at all.”

Discussion Strategies

Amelia said that she uses philosophical chairs and Socratic circles in her classroom, preferring philosophical chairs because “it’s more open-minded and you can change sides and there’s less judgment.” She also encourages her students to “play devil’s advocate” so that they can argue a point even if their beliefs do not align with the point. She has also utilized electronic discussion boards while teaching using *The Hate U Give* (Thomas, 2017) so that student responses are “in writing,” another way to protect herself.

Karla uses direct questioning when a student asks, “Why are we studying this?” She responds to her students by asking, “Well, why do you think we are studying this?” or “What do you think?” so that the students have to think about the content and why they are learning about a particular topic.

Being Good Humans

One of the most interesting findings for the researchers is a prevalent theme in each of the interviews that provided insight into why the teachers risk controversy, face challenges, and weather difficulties: they are committed to growing good human beings. Karla said that teaching middle level grades, for her, is about curating nice people, “I just want them to learn how to be nice people and then be nice to themselves.” When

discussing sharing her own personal views about the topics she teaches about, Suzannah said that she is becoming more comfortable with doing that in order to teach her students about being “good people” and “we have a shared humanity.” She expanded on this idea later in the interview when talking about a rural community’s perceptions of controversial literature. Suzannah states, “I just really think that the more you’re around someone, the more you’re willing to understand them.” Lori discussed this topic in a very similar way stating, “If you don’t listen to the voices that you don’t often hear, how will you know that there are other voices?” and “There are all kinds of boxes, and books are the way to show us other people’s voices and other people’s boxes.”

Ella discussed this in more detail when asked why she teaches literature that may be regarded as controversial. She said:

> Well, I think it’s really important, especially as an educator, I think part of my job is to help students look at different sides and be able to form a good argument for whatever they believe. Also, some of our more personal belief[s], but some of our controversial topics are basic. How do you treat people well? I mean we talk about racism, for example, it’s all about how do you treat people well?

She follows up later in the interview, noting that students do not have to accept others’ ideas, but they do need to be “aware of them and you need to know how to be respectful of them and others’ viewpoints.”

Summary

A summary table is helpful in viewing overall responses to the in-depth interview questions. Table 2 addresses critical elements of the interviews and the research participants’ responses.

Table 2

Summary Table of Research Participants’ Responses

NDA = Not Directly Addressed

Research Participants (Pseudonyms)	Received professional development for teaching controversial topics	Seeks out professional learning on their own	Uses texts with content about race and/or cultures	Uses texts with content about religion	Uses texts with sexual content	Uses texts with LBGTQIA+ content	Received pushback/questions from students	Received pushback/questions from the community	Received pushback/questions from families	Feels supported by administrator	Avoids sharing personal views on controversial topics
Amelia	No	Yes	Yes	NDA	NDA	No	NDA	No	Yes	Yes[1]	Yes
Karla	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes[2]
Suzannah	Yes	Yes	Yes	NDA	NDA	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	No[3]
Lori	No	Yes	Yes	NDA	Yes	NDA	NDA	No	Yes	Yes	No
Clay	NDA	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	No
Ella	No	Yes	Yes	NDA	NDA	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes

1 – Administrator indicated very limited support for using *The Hate U Give*.

2 – “I don’t really have to particularly state directly what my view is. I just live my view.”

3 – Shares in “superficial” ways.

Discussion

Implications for Teaching and Learning

Agency for Professional Learning

Just as in Karnopp’s (2022) research, each of the participants sought out professional learning opportunities. One enrolled in a graduate program, another attended workshops and coursework to support teaching methodologies to be used with controversial literature, and each became members of state, national, and international organizations to increase their knowledge about and support for teaching with texts deemed to be controversial. For example, each teacher was independent in their instructional decisions, not teaming with other teachers in their district on the content to be taught or instructional methods to be used because they were often the only educator teaching American literature.

Using Inclusive Pedagogy

Inclusive pedagogy is evident in the work of each participant. Critical consciousness is visible through the desire of the participants to “create good people” and to help their students understand the past to lessen the likelihood of repeating the actions of the Jim Crow era. Classroom instruction provided opportunities for students to examine their own perspectives, to give voice to their learnings, and to create safe spaces to have discussions about controversial topics using specific strategies.

The research participants had created classroom communities where students felt safe to read, write, and discuss topics even when those same students may have families that do not agree with the literature that is being used within the walls of the school. The teachers in the study had built safe spaces for their students and modeled, each day, what they expected from their students. Wilson (2023) notes, "When our actions, speech, and policies are informed by a framework of kindness, then we can change a generation of students” (p. ix). Through their own actions, the educators in this study were advocating for and giving voice to their students.

Further Research

The findings from this research are certainly important to informing our work with rural students and educators, especially in the rural school settings in the Midwest. The researchers believe it is critical that this research continue and broaden to other states with rural areas that are different from those highlighted here. As noted at the beginning of the manuscript, rural communities are defined by the people who settled there and their history related to proximity to larger cities. Many small towns suffer from a dwindling population, and this fact also impacts who remains living in those areas. We believe expanding the research to other states and rural settings within those states would be an important step for further study. As noted earlier, Karla had lived in a rural southern setting, and her experiences there did not mirror the experiences of the other participants. Finding out other rural educators’ experiences is critical to this research topic.

The interviews conducted for this research included six educators. Expanding the number of research participants could better inform and assist those concerned with how rural students are being educated and provide a step toward understanding the challenges, the opportunities, and the impact on those students’ futures as well as their preparation for post-high school education and employment. Retaining talented teachers committed to teaching in rural settings is critical, especially while confronting the current teacher shortage crisis. Teachers need to feel supported and free to include teaching with controversial texts in their classrooms. Further research on this topic can enlighten other stakeholders on the importance of doing so.

Conclusion

Each of the research participants confirmed what Wilson (2023) purports, and that is that teachers "have a responsibility to the diverse populations that we serve, and the wider society, to portray narratives different from our own and those that give a more complete picture of our society" (p. 97). The researchers assert that each of the participants had, at some points in their career and sometimes very recently, felt uncomfortable using a particular piece of literature, examining students' (and their families') beliefs about topics being discussed in the classroom, or because they were concerned about possible repercussions. However, each believed it was their responsibility to continue using the titles they cited, researching about the topics, and discussing the content in order for students to learn the most possible about race, cultures, ethnicities, LGBTQIA+, and other sometimes controversial topics. But, more importantly, they believed in their capabilities to create good humans in the process. Even when their students or families may not have agreed with them, having civil discourse within their classrooms was a critical component of their discussions with the researchers. Wilson's (2023) words echo the research participants in this study:

> Because public schools are open for all children (maybe one of the greatest institutions in our world), we have the radical charge to educate all students and support families from all backgrounds. This means that sometimes our personal values may not align with the families of our students. In our increasingly politically divided society, this can create conflict over how to best educate our students. As educators, we have to tread these lines carefully, honoring and respecting the family's personal views while also providing high-quality education. For the most part, we can approach conflicts in values with kindness and respect, agreeing to disagree on topics. (p. 94)

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About the Author(s)

Linda Gray Smith, Ph.D., is an associate professor in the School of Education at Northwest Missouri State University. Linda teaches middle school, secondary content, and K-12 undergraduate curriculum courses and classroom management. Educational Leadership students are enrolled in courses that she authored and teaches in the Master's and Specialists programs. Linda also coordinates the secondary education classes and advises middle school education majors. In collaboration with others, she has published articles, a book chapter, and presented at professional conferences at the international, national, regional, and state levels. She has served as a K-12 administrator and a high school English teacher. Lsmith@nwmissouri.edu

Victoria Seeger, Ph.D., recently retired as an associate professor at Northwest Missouri State University in the School of Education. Vicki continues to teach in the online environment for graduate programs in reading and curriculum and instruction. She reviews manuscripts for *Kansas English* and the ILA journal, *The Reading Teacher*. She lives in Lawrence, Kansas. VSEEGER@nwmissouri.edu

Appendix A

Initial Survey Administered through Google Forms

Question 1:

In the space below, identify literature that you have used in your classroom that may be viewed as controversial or has been challenged by the community in which you teach. Please note that literature refers to not only books, but specific poems, news articles, speeches, etc. Do not limit your answers to "books." Include title of the text and author. Note if the text was challenged within your school and the reason for the challenge.

Question 2:

Has anyone in your school challenged the literature that has been used in the setting? Who has challenged literature in your school setting (check all that apply):

Students

Parents/Caregivers

Fellow Teachers

Building Administrator(s)

District Administrator(s)

School Board Members

Question 3:

How often has literature that you teach been challenged. If so, when did that occur?

Question 4:

What is your school district's process when a concerned party challenges the content of literature that is being used to teach in the classroom?

Appendix B

Interview Questions for Individual Interviews

How do you define controversial topics?

Why have you decided to teach literature that some have regarded as controversial?

Describe the preparation you have had in addressing controversial issues in your classroom. This could be in your teacher preparation program, professional development, or personal professional reading.

When discussing controversial topics, do you disclose your personal views on the topic? Why or why not?

Describe the preparation you do in your classroom with your students to prepare them for literature studies and classroom discussions that may be controversial.

How do you prepare your administrator that potentially controversial topics will be discussed in your classroom?

Do you notify families of the potentially controversial topics you will be reading and discussing in class? If so, how?

Describe the lesson planning that you do for the instruction of potentially controversial literature.

How is your planning different for potentially controversial literature than other pieces of literature?

When literature has been challenged, how have you been contacted about the challenge?

Describe a concern that has been presented to you about a specific piece of literature.

How supported do you feel when these concerns arise? Who supports you and how?

What has been the result of challenged literature in your setting, i.e. have you continued teaching with the text?

Have you experienced any threatening behaviors related to challenged literature in your setting? Please describe.

Appendix C

Literature, Texts, and Other Resources Cited by Research Participants

(Numbers in brackets indicate how many participants referenced the source.]

Texts

Alexie, S. (2009). *The absolutely true diary of a part-time Indian*. Little, Brown Books for Young Readers. [3]

Angelou, M. – various works.

Atwood, M. (1998). *The handmaid's tale*. Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group.

Bullard, S. (1994). *Free at last: A history of the Civil Rights Movement and those who died in the struggle.* Oxford University Press. (Excerpt: "Innocents Lost" profile).

Chbosky, S. (2012). *The perks of being a wallflower*. MTV Books.

Covey, S. (2014). *The 7 habits of highly effective teens*. Simon and Schuster.

Crowe, C. (2003). *Mississippi trial, 1955*. Speak.

Curtis, C. P. (1997). *The Watsons go to Birmingham - 1963*. Yearling.

Dahl, R. (1995). *Lamb to the slaughter and other stories*. Penguin Books.

Frank, A. (2021). *The diary of a young girl.* Bantam.

Hansberry, L. (2004). *A raisin in the sun*. Vintage.

Hinton, S. E. (2006). *The outsiders*. Viking Books for Young Readers.

King, M. L. (1994). *Letter from the Birmingham jail*. Harper Collins.

Konigsberg, B. (2018). *Honestly Ben*. Scholastic, Inc.

Lawrence, J. & Lee, R. E. (2003). *Inherit the wind: The powerful drama of the greatest courtroom of the century*. Ballentine Books.

Lee, H. (1983). *To kill a mockingbird*. Mass Paperback. [3]

Lowry, L. *Number the stars*. Clarion Books.

Reynolds, J. & Kendi, I. X. (2020). *Stamped: Racism, antiracism, and you: A Remix of the National Book Award-winning Stamped from the beginning*. Little, Brown Books for Young Readers. (Excerpt: "Story of the World's First Racist").

Reynolds, J. & Kiely, B. (2017). *All American boys*. Atheneum.

Reynolds, J. (2019). *Long way down*. Atheneum.

Rowling, J. K. (1999). *Harry Potter and the sorcerer's stone*. Perfection Learning.

Steinbeck, J. (1993). *Of mice and men*. Penguin Books.

Stevenson, B. (2015). *Just mercy: A story of justice and redemption*. One World.

Stone, N. (2018). *Dear Martin*. Ember.

Taylor, M. D. (2001). *Roll of thunder, hear my cry*. No publisher listed.

Thomas, A. (2018). *The hate u give*. Walker Books. [3]

Twain, M. (1981 reissue). *The adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Bantam Books. [3]

Walker, A. (1973). Everyday use. *Harper's Weekly, 4*. https://harpers.org/archive/1973/04/everydayuse/

Yoon, N. (2019). *The sun is also a star*. Ember.

Documentaries/Movies/Videos/Plays

Emmett Till documentary found on YouTube (there are several; exact documentary is not noted)

Hazard, A. (April 12, 2019). *The Atlantic slave trade: What too few textbooks told you* [Video

file]. Retrieved from https://www.ted.com/talks/anthony_hazard_the_atlantic_slave_trade_what_too_few_textbooks_told_you?language=en

Insider (March 10, 2021). *Black farmers say they still face discrimination, years after record USDA Payouts* [Video file]. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7N74CChM7yc

Melfi, D. (Director). (2016). Hidden figures [film]. 20th Century Fox.

Miller, A. (1953). *The Crucible*. oscarmanhollywood (August 3, 2012). Mighty times: The children's march [Video file]. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5c113fq3vhQ

Websites

Biography.com for Black History Month resources. https://www.biography.com/search?query=black+history+month

History.com History of the Ku Klux Klan. https://www.history.com/topics/reconstruction/ku-klux-klan

Newsela articles about Hispanic Heritage Month, Cesar Chavez, Poncho Villa, Operation Peter

Pan. https://newsela.com/

Uncovering the KKK. https://www.teachervision.com/american-history-us-history/uncovering-kkk

News Sources

Buchanan, L., Bui, Q., & Patel, J. K. (2020). Black Lives Matter may be the largest movement in U.S. history. *The New York Times*. https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/07/03/us/george-floyd-protests-crowd-size.html

BBC

NPR

Reuter's

Strapagiel, L. (October 20, 2022). Watching TikToks makes me hopeful about the future. Buzzfeednews.com. https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/laurenstrapagiel/tiktok-teens-gen-z-hope

Speeches/TED Talks

I Have a Dream by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Various TED talks including speeches about humanity and empathy

Atlantic Slave Trade TED Talk video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3NXC4Q_4JVg&ab_channel=TED-Ed

Poetry

Burns, D. (1989). Sure you can ask me a personal question.

Gorman, A. (2021). The hill we climb.

Whitman, W. (1892). Songs of myself.

Primary Sources

Ad Fontes Bias Chart. https://adfontesmedia.com/interactive-media-bias-chart/

Born in slavery: Slave narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936 to 1938. Library of

Congress. https://www.loc.gov/collections/slave-narratives-from-the-federal-writers-project-1936-to-1938/about-this-collection/

Holocaust photographs (no reference for source)

Primary accounts of local segregation history (no reference for source)

Music

Billie Holliday

Song lyrics by Bruce Springsteen

Song lyrics by Lady Gaga

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Everywhere and Nowhere…All at Once: Exploring the Role of Visibility in Rural Queer Narratives

Clint Whitten, *Virginia Tech*

Following the tragedy of another shooting that happened in a visibly Queer space, this study explores how Queerness in rural spaces generates a spectrum of visibility. *Men in Place* (2019) by Miriam Abelson and *Out in the Country: Youth Media and Queer Visibility in Rural America* (2009) by Mary Gray, personal narratives/podcasts cultivated by *Country Queers*, and "place histories" such as Brandon Teena and Matthew Shepard which were highly visible cases of rural Queer overkill, are used as objects of study to explore the role and function of visibility in rural contexts. After exploring these rural Queer-centric narratives, I generated three thematic categories: working to preserve Queer comfort in rural spaces, identity work of rural Queerness, and fears and spaces of violence. I conclude by using the three categories to offer three implications for educational practices to complicate our understanding of Queer visibility in rural schools.

***Keywords*: Queer, rural, K-12 schools, visibility, identity, well-being**

The CNNs headline on November 21st, 2022, read: *Gunman kills 5 at LGBTQ nightclub in Colorado Springs before patrons confront and stop him, police say (*Leveson et al., 2022). The clay-red roof displays "Club Q" with yellow, red, green, and blue squares creating a retro logo for the "adult-oriented gay and lesbian nightclub." There are panels on the outside of the building painted red, orange, yellow, green, blue, and purple. The colors of the rainbow and the Google description of the space signal a Queer space of acceptance, love, and community; however, that night five humans were murdered while 19 others were injured by an openly visible domestic terrorist. Previously, the domestic terrorist was associated with legible harm for a bomb threat aimed toward his own mother. CNN states,

> Sheriff's deputies responded to a report by the man's mother he was "threatening to cause harm to her with a homemade bomb, multiple weapons, and ammunition," according to the release. Deputies called the suspect, and he "refused to comply with orders to surrender," the release said, leading them to evacuate nearby homes. (Andone & Wolfe, 2022)

A visible domestic terrorist targets a visible Queer public space.

Raymond Green Vance (he/him)

Kelly Loving (she/her)

Daniel Aston (he/him)

Derrick Rump (he/him)

Ashley Paugh (she/ her)

A less tragic image of visibility presents itself also in current educational discourse as schools call for the removal of Pride flags and symbols from school systems. School leaders argue that Pride artifacts in schools can be considered politically divisive. This subtly tells Queer faculty and students that being Queer is divisive and, without the display of Pride, schools can hide Queerness from their public spaces. Most importantly, many of these decisions are being discussed at the local level with school boards which creates an importance of addressing how institutions, within a place context, influences the function of visibility. Removal of visible symbols generates invisible Queerness. The tragedy of Club Q coupled with the oppressive and homophobic policies in education provides windows into considering the function of binaries of being visible or being invisible.

This sense of visibility is especially important in the context of place (urban, suburban, rural, and tribal). Exploring the binary of visible and invisible requires the context of place in order to examine the function of who and how a human displays their Queerness. As Valentine (2002) argues, "…space is understood to play an active role in the constitution and reproduction of social identities and, vice versa, social identities, meanings, and relations are recognized as producing material and symbolic or metaphorical spaces" (Introduction, para 3). A salient issue in contemporary rural studies has considered the function of Queerness when it comes to addressing inequities, safety, and movement. For example, the dominant migration narrative of rurality and Queerness emphasizes a need to move out of rural towns to find Queer communities. Similarly, rural studies also seek to disrupt a migration narrative of having to leave rural areas for opportunities and resources. These monolithic narratives highlight a need to challenge an understanding of visibility in these rural Queer studies.

However, feeling *seen* or *being hidden* creates a binary of how to fit into identities of Queer and rural. To further disrupt this binary through the lens of rurality, the objects of study in this essay will be grounding text, *Men in Place* (2019) by Miriam Abelson and *Out in the Country: Youth Media and Queer Visibility in Rural America* (2009) by Mary Gray, personal narratives/podcasts cultivated by *Country Queers,* and place histories such as Brandon Teena and Matthew Shepard which were highly visible cases of rural Queer overkill. By placing these texts in conversation together, the driving question becomes: How do Queer theory and space as an area of identity construction challenges the concept of visibility for rural spaces and bodies? Through this question, I hope to

provide some implications on the role of visibility in educational spaces. By examining the spectrum of visibility from *Country Queers,* place histories (Matthew Shepard and Brandon Teena), and the grounding texts by Abelson and Gray, several significant themes emerged to disrupt the binaries of being visible. Based on this research, I argue that defining the role of visibility in rural communities and schools also means addressing place histories, community culture, and expanding our ideas of place within a geographical context. This argument has direct implications to research that involves Queer youth and faculty in educational settings.

Defining Terms

Rurality

Rural studies have consistently discussed the challenges of defining the meaning of rurality. It has been argued that one singular definition of rurality risks generating monolithic frames around what rural constitutes. As Longhurst (2022) argues, “At first glance, rurality may appear to be purely a matter of geography and population density, with formal definitions and designations designed by governmental bodies” (p. 10). While mostly used in educational spaces, some researchers rely on population density databases such as the National Center for Educational Statistics to scale what rural means. Following this definition of rurality, the population density maps code for rural fringe, distant, and remote. However, relying on population density as a method of defining rural, could have counties with one denser town with miles of rurality surrounding that one town. That county could lose the rural code which has greater implications for state resource distribution. Isserman (2005) describes a rural-urban typology which does attest to the issues around concepts of homogenous rural counties. Therefore, it is important to attempt to define rural as more than just population-based.

To further define rural apart from a population-based term, Dunstan et al., (2021) argue that “...rurality is not just about metrics; it is multidimensional and sociocultural” (p.72). This multidimensional approach allows for the rural definition to include local culture within that definition. For example, rural spaces are also a place for social identity development, culture, and developing epistemologies. Bell (2007) writes,

> It calls upon the connections we have long made between rural life and food, cultivation, community, nature, wild freedom, and masculine patriarchal power, and the many contradictions we have also so long associated with the rural, such as desolation, isolation, dirt and disease, wild danger, and the straw-hatted rube. (p.409)

A definition of rural may address population and distance from urban places yet it must also acknowledge the culture of rural social life such as the tight-knit communities that share values and customs. For example, in their study on methods that lead to higher graduation rates in rural school, Wilcox et al., (2014) found,

> ...although the educators in the rural schools in this study had not escaped the challenges identified by other researchers discussed earlier (e.g., increased accountability to the state, decreasing populations and tax base, increasing transiency and deeper poverty), they focused on the advantages offered by their small, tightly knit communities. (p. 13)

Wilcox et al.'s study illustrates the ways in which community engagement becomes centric in rural educational spaces.

Queerness

Queer, as a social label, is used to define any human's gender or sexuality that is outside of cis-heteronormative norms. While Queer may act as a blanket term, it is important to acknowledge the varying privileges that exist in this label. For example, a cis-white gay man still holds white and cis privileges that a Black trans woman might not have in a society that is built on power dynamics. Those intersecting identities create certain frictions when it comes to existing in a society that values some identities over others. The act of being Queer, as Sedgwick (1994) describes is "the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or *can't* be made) to signify a monolithically" (p. 9). Queerness operates in a flux cycle of identity-creating and solidifying.

Apart from Queer being defined as a label, Queer can also be used to challenge broader discourse. Luciano and Chen (2015) described their function of Queer as a "tool of incessant unsettling" (p. 192). Using Queer as a tool of unsettling a binary or a dominant discourse allows Queerness to operate from the center of the podcast, two main texts, and place histories. Therefore, Queer, a tool of incessant unsettling, provides a lens to challenge the binaries of visibility.

Visibility

The term visible in this narrative inquiry means to exist outwardly. In other words, being visible whether through symbols, language, or common knowledge, allows others to *see* a place, person, or thing on both micro and macro levels. For example, Club Q was a visible Queer space because it displays rainbow colors which many people understand as a visible symbol for Pride. Moreover, a Pride flag in a classroom might be a visible symbol for students that the space is Queer affirming. Being visible could be how a person outwardly presents themselves. For example, if a gay man paints his nails and wears a shirt that says "love wins" while kissing another man on the side of the street, one may assume that man is visibility Queer. To ground these examples, Kazyak (2012) suggests, "...one route to visibility in rural contexts is relational (via connection with a same-sex partner) rather than individual (via butch gender presentations)" (p. 841).

Relational and individual visibility begins to complicate the narrative of appearance and attraction while also queering the role of individual and public visibility.

Apart from club signs, pride flags, painted nails, a shirt, and the act of kissing, visibility can also be knowledge that others know about a topic. As a former openly Queer educator, my body might not be visibility Queer; however, my students knew that I was an openly gay man. In that temporal moment, my Queerness was not on display, but I was still visible to my students because of my prior disclosure of my identity.

Rurality and Queerness matter because there are fewer Queer resources and access to health care (Abelson, 2019; Page 2017; Ramos et al., 2014), higher rates of victimization and discrimination (Evans et al., 2014; Fallin-Bennett & Goodin 2019; Kosciw et al., 2015; Kosciw et al., 2022; Palmer et al., 2012), high levels of substance abuse in rural Queer youth (Fallin-Bennett & Goodin, 2019) , and rural spaces often rely on tight-knit communities of being known/seen within their communities while reproducing norms for the community values (Bishop & McClellan, 2016; Page, 2017). Therefore, Rural Queers may feel and look different within the context of visibility in order to navigate the relationship of also feeling seen and known within their communities. The relational, community, and self visibly display of Queerness generates complex feelings around belonging and mattering towards internal self and community.

Theoretical Grounding

The objects of study will be thematically analyzed with the foundation of place-based theory and Queer studies. Place-based theory is predominantly associated with educational pedagogy implications which describes how using place can influence a child's engagement with content. Smith (2002) states, "The primary value of place-based education lies in the way that it serves to strengthen children's connections to other and to the regions in which they live" (p. 594). Place explores how space and place can influence how people learn about themselves, society, and construct new knowledges in turn it allows a person to generate meaning in society (Freire & Macedo, 1987). Place-based theory, outside just the educational context, operates to allow people to examine the influences of place in connection to humanity.

Apart from place-based theory, Queer studies heavily influences the exploration of the objects of study. Berlant and Warner (1995) write, "Queer commentary shows that much of what passes for general culture is riddled with heteronormativity" (p. 349). Queer studies join the conversation with Black Feminist women, disability studies, and Indigenous studies. These areas within Queer studies provide resources in intersecting labels of gender and race, temporal identities in conversation with an able-bodied society, and broader cultural conversations around gender/sexuality. It attempts to challenge the variables that Ahmed (2010) highlights in her concept of the pursuit of happiness which rewards people with social conventions, family domesticity, privatization, legal protections, and civil societies, if that person gets as close to possible to being a cis-male,

white, abled-body, middle class human. Whiteness and cis-heteronormativity being two pillars in the discourse of stereotype-threat that rural communities face. Part of the conversation in Queer studies challenges the ways in which a dominant monolithic discourse gets reproduced and influences body, knowledge, self, and society.

Listening to these two theories provides a critical Queer place concept that centers both place and Queer in tandem in order to challenge assumptions around those intersecting identities. bell hooks (2009) intersectional sense of belonging in Kentucky was described as,

> While my early sense of identity was shaped by the anarchic life of the hills, I did not identify with being Kentuckian. Racial separatism, white exploitation and oppression of black folks, was so widespread it pained my already hurting heart. (p. 7)

Black rural histories, and the current realities in some rural spaces, hold with them oppression and separatism which makes it difficult to celebrate, in bell hook's case, both Blackness and Kentuckian.

In my own subjectivity as a white, cis-gay man, I often write about my time in the river and gardening with my grandma; however, I struggled to identify as rural because of the homophobia I experienced in my rural childhood. In continuation of complicating the intersection of whiteness, gayness, and rurality, other examples are two gay men running an educational chicken farm TikTok account (TikTok's 2guysandsomeland) or Matt Mathew's "farm livin" TikTok which highlights farming culture with flamboyant Queerness. Both examples begin to challenge the assumptions of what Queerness and rurality look like in conversation together. This framework allows the objects of study to acknowledge those two variables in the context of how those identities disrupt the binaries of visibility.

Objects of Study

The objects of study are split into three categories: "Grounding Research Texts," *Country Queers*, and Brandon Teena and Matthew Shepard which provide foundations of trauma in rural Queer culture.

Grounding Research Texts

Out in the Country by Mary Gray (2009) and *Men in Place: Trans Masculinity, Race, and Sexuality in America* by Miriam Abelson (2019) were selected based on how they center narratives in their research designs while also addressing Queerness and rurality. Gray's manuscript uses rural youth as her object of study as she explores their experiences living in rural areas. Gray writes,

> To date, no studies have focused specifically on youth in the rural United States and their negotiations of a queer sense of self and the expectations of visibility that have become a feature of modern LGBT experience and popular cultures. (p. 11)

Gray's research directly explores how Queer rural youth experience visibility. Gray states,

> I bring together gay and lesbian studies of community and identity, social theories of public spaces, and studies of media reception, particular the role of new media in everyday life, to frame how sociality, location, and media shape visibility of LGBT-identifying young people living in rural areas of Kentucky and along its borders (p. 4)

Using media, socialization, and place allowed Gray to emphasize areas of visibility. Abelson's book navigates the role of masculinity in the context of place, race, gender, and sexuality through the narratives of trans people. Rurality is explored in the term "redneck" which is cited to have been used frequently from Abelson's interviewees. She states, "For most of the men in this study, the redneck was an extreme form of hypermasculinity to define themselves against" (p. 37). While exploring rurality through the term redneck produces a harmful deficit stereotype around rurality, Abelson does attempt to address how place influences being visible through interviews with nine rural identifying trans men. The interviews in Abelson's study still present findings garnered from the lived experience of trans men living in rural areas.

Country Queers

This online website features both written narratives and podcasts of Queer rural adults who predominantly discuss what rurality means to them. Their mission statement: "Country Queers is an ongoing multimedia oral history project documenting the diverse experiences of rural, small town, and country, LGBTQIA2S+ people - across intersecting layers of identity such as race, class, age, ability, gender identity, and religion" (*Country Queers*). For the purpose of this study, the three oral history interviews (2014-2016) and the transcripts of season two (2022) of their podcast were used. This included: oral histories of Robyn Thirkill (41, Virginia), Twig Delgue (31, New Mexico), Crisosto Apache (42, Colorado); and podcast interviews of KD Randle (Mississippi), Dana Kaplan (Vermont), Miguel Mendías (Texas), Sam Gleaves (Kentucky), Adria Stembridge (Georgia), and Kūʻiʻolani (Hawaii). Each of these narratives specifically explored their own rural and Queer identity. These oral narratives allow for a more holistic experience of what it means to be Queer in a rural space. While these are mostly adult interviews, the stories they exhume, are stories that may produce common experience across Queer rural humans.

Violent Place Histories'

Queer history exists with trauma, pain, and violence. For years, Queer people have been victims of overkill (Stanley, 2021). These histories expand into rural contexts through the lives of Matthew Shepard and Brandon Teena. These two humans are centric to rural Queer history as their overkilled bodies have continued to exist for rural Queer people to see. Shepard and Teena were also referenced heavily in both Abelson and Gray's manuscripts.

Matthew Shepard (1976-1998) attended the University of Wyoming where he was an openly gay man. After attending a LGBT+ meeting on campus, Shepard went to Fireside, a local bar ("Our Story"). That night Shepard was abducted, over-beaten, and left tied to a fence. A few days later, Shepard was pronounced dead at the hospital. Gray (2009) states,

> The 1998 murder of Matthew Shepard in the college town of Laramie, Wyoming (population 27,000), brought to the fore that city-based queer-youth social movements seemed able to do little more than pity and demonize those living outside of urban centers. (p. xiii-xiv)

Shepard's narrative lives past his body as it serves as an extremely relevant case of a visible overkilling of an openly gay man in a rural space.

Brandon Teena (1973-1993) lived in rural Nebraska as a trans man. After being publicly outed in the newspaper due to a criminal charge. Following his public outing, Teena was raped; however, no charges were filed. A few weeks later, the rapist returned and overkilled Teena by stabbing and shooting him. Gray (2009) writes, "Media coverage of the 1993 New Year's Eve murder of Brandon Teena, a young female-to-male transperson, in rural Nebraska…emphasized the brutality of their deaths against a backdrop of the rural communities in which they were killed" (p. 113-114). In Abelson's (2019) study, "...Brandon Teena's story came up frequently and tied the men's fears to rural spaces, which made for a heightened fear of vulnerability to transgender-based violence overall" (p.146). Again, Teena's life exists past his body as an example of how visibility led to a Queer rural human being overkilled.

Placing Teena and Shepard in conversation with *Country Queers* and Gray and Abelson, provides inquiry into the function of visibility for rural Queer people.

Emerging Themes: Spectrum of Visibility

After exploring the objects of study, a thematic analysis uncovered several themes on how visibility is negotiated for these rural Queer lived experiences.

Preserving Comfort

Throughout the narratives, feelings of comfortability became a central focus when it came to exploring their Queerness in rural contexts. Many of the narratives highlighted

sense of risk versus reward. Their spectrum of visibility was explored in order to remain comfortable even if that meant hiding their visible Queerness.

When asked about when he knew he was Queer, Dana Kaplan (Vermont) describes,

> I think the part of me that was the part of me that super cared about, like, what other people thought and not wanting to rock the boat, and not wanting other people to feel uncomfortable, sort of, like putting other people's sense of comfort before my own. Made it so that I didn't come out for a while…(*Country Queers, Podcast Season 2 Episode 7*)

Kaplan expresses a desire to create comfort to not "rock the boat" in his rural context. In rural communities where people might be known more frequently based on fewer people inhabiting that community, a desire to not want to draw attention to oneself creates a moment for someone to question how visible they are to the community.

Apart from fostering a sense of comfort in relation to visibility, rurality itself provided some of the people comfort. Robyn Thirkill (41, Virginia), stated in an oral interview, "I want to be here. I feel a very strong heritage to this property that's been in my family for over 100 years. I want to respect my heritage, and I want to preserve this land" (*Country Queers*). For Thirkill, the land and heritage provided him a sense of comfort that urban spaces could never grant him. Remaining in rurality creates a place of comfort that is valued in tandem with their Queerness. Bell and Valentine (1995) write, "For others, it is a place of escape from the evils of the city, either as an occasional recreational resource or as the setting for a whole new way of life (communal, ecofriendly, etc.)" (p. 120). The creating comfort in rural spaces in connection to Thirkill and Kaplan led them to resist rural Queer migration.

Furthermore, Gray's (2009) book describes a scene of a few youths performing Drag in at the local Walmart with a high school Pride group. The youth would post photos online of them in Drag. After being verbally assaulted one day, the youth decided to remove the photos online. After being highly visible in Drag and posting online, an act of violence made the youth remove their visibility from the community. Gray argues, "Removing the photos makes him complicit in keeping local queer youth's boundary publics from expanding too far into and thereby threatening an imagined public sphere" (p. 113). The visibility in the public sphere created a moment for the youth to be verbally assaulted which in turn makes the youth become publicly invisible again to preserve comfort.

In Abelson's study, trans men describe their connection to rurality in the context of hypermasculinity. Abelson (2019) argues, "In these narratives, gay men exist in rural spaces but are locked into an inauthentic and exaggerated state in opposition to the redneck" (p. 45). In this context, the place of rurality may generate an inauthentic self to

seek out comfort. The inauthentic and exaggerated state also created a unique layer to how visibility functions in connection to attempting to create comfort. Therefore, when considering the role of visibility in Queer rural context a possible variable to consider is a person's level of comfort.

Production of Spaces

Another emerging theme from the narratives was how rural Queer people produce new spaces to float in between the binaries of invisible and visible. Most importantly within this theme of space, rural Queer people explore physical spaces that provide community or exploration within their own flux Queer identities as well.

In chapter five of *Out in the Country*, Gray (2009) explores how the internet created a space for rural Queer people to generate a community. These online spaces allowed rural Queer people a chance to read about others' coming out stories while also searching for similarities in the Queer community. Gray states, "Internet-based genres of Queer realness offer rural youth possibilities for both recognition and acknowledgment of seeking that recognition in places one is presumed to already be familiar" (p. 140). The possibilities of the internet make space for rural Queer youth to be invisible while also engaging in visibility Queer material. Using the internet as a platform, which is also found in the *County Queers* podcast, to produce new spaces that queer the function of visibility offers us a window into considering how rural Queer people make meaning out of new or existing places (similarly to how the youth turned a Walmart into a Drag space).

Rural spaces that lacked visible Queer spaces push rural people to seek out Queerness through movement. For example, Miguel Mendías (Texas) stated in his interview podcast,

> And, when I was like 14, he'd [his dad] take me and my brother to the gay part of Dallas, just where they had like bookstores, and a coffee shop, in the daytime. But there was 4 also like gay bars there and lesbian bars. And he would point these things out to me and my brother. And he just told us, like, "You need to see that gay people exist. And just not think it's weird, it's normal. It's not a big deal". (*Country Queers, Podcast Season 2 Episode 6*)

Miguel's narrative expresses the production of spaces through migration. In order for Miguel's dad to present Queerness, they had to travel to a city "gayborhood." Similarly, Conner and Okamura (2022) argued,

> Most of the rural participants we interviewed took short trips to a nearby city with a 'gayborhood.'…This involved finding a designated driver for the 120-mile ride home, though we also spoke to those who somehow made the long commute home safely. (p. 7)

Again, to produce a Queer space, Miguel and as Conner describes, must move and seek out visible Queer spaces.

In contrast, some rural Queer people did not need the visible Queer spaces that may have required movement. For example, KD Randle (Mississippi) describes rural landscape as their space they enjoy being in. Randle says, “The rural landscape, seeing trees, you know, seeing trees, seeing open pasture…seeing sunsets. It’s just these simple things and scenery that really just make me love, love this country” (*Country Queers, Podcast Season 2 Episode 8*). Randle does not rely on creating a visible Queer space or moving to seek out a Queer space, instead the production of space that allowed them to feel seen was just the rural landscape. The nature-centric place provided the sense of community that others may strive for when looking for highly visible Queer spaces.

Instead of seeking highly visible Queer spaces, Abelson (2019) describes how the rural trans narratives mostly seek “needs or experiences related to place” (p. 199). Abelson continues by arguing, “Trans men in both urban and rural context have received inadequate care from medical providers” (p. 198). She acknowledges that urban spaces might have more opportunities to obtain more Queer-friendly health care; however, it does provide a point of discourse around what is the value of highly Queer spaces in terms of health care and education. Overall, the ways in which rural Queer folks produce new spaces, value current space, and questions space through the lens of access to resources, generates a spectrum of visibility.

Identity Work in Rural Queerness

Following a sense of comfort and a production of space, the objects of study in conversation together, also pointed to a deep sense of identity work around Queer and rural in the context of visibility. Chan and Howard (2020) call upon Foucault (1980) and suggest, “In this lens, the Foucauldian approach tends to maximize on the ever-changing nature of sexuality. It is fluid and operates as a function of contextual, historical, cultural, social, and political forces” (p. 351). With this framework, identity work emerges as a theme around the function of visibility because of the constant flux identity development is in along with the spectrum of visibility. Following the theme of production of space, Gorman-Murray (2007) explore the role of movement in terms of identity work by staying, “…migration becomes the spatialization of an ongoing process of coming out, where each site of attachment along a migratory path momentarily grounds who one is, or was, in this process of becoming” (p. 113). Therefore, when disrupt the binaries of visibility, identity work can also be used as a source of flux because of the process of identity development.

Kūʻiʻolani (Hawaii), when asked if they ever felt like they had to leverage one identity over the other based on other understandings, stated:

> Oh, all the time. Yes. I think that's part of, like, when I talk about having a compartmentalized identity…And then in my Hawaiian community, I feel, no, I don't feel like they can, they see who I am. Yeah. I guess in a lot of ways. And, and, I also feel like they don't accept my queerness and that, or my version of queerness, you know? (*Country Queers, Podcast Season 2 Episode 2*)

Kūʻiʻolani describes the methods in which some people must compartmentalize their identity which connects back to the idea that identity work is in a constant state of flux. Around some people Kūʻiʻolani's feels like all of their identities are valued; whereas, in some spaces they do not feel like their identity is as accepted. Gray (2009) expresses an intersecting analysis, as well, with the story of Brandon and John W which describe how Brandon dealt with the intersections of being Black and gay while John W questioned his identity of gay in connection to BDSM practices. This also highlights how some indigenous cultures already acknowledge a third gender (e.g., mahu people in Hawaiian culture).

Sam Gleaves' (Kentucky) interview provides a complex narrative of the role of community visibility in connection to community history in a way that influenced Gleaves's identity development. First, Gleaves describes a lack of openly gay people in his community. He says, "If I'd of known, like, if my parents had had friends that were couples, you know, same sex couples, that would have instilled this whole different awareness in me that this existed in the world…" (*Country Queers, Podcast Season 2 Episode 4*). Gleaves process of identity was influenced by a lack of visibility in others in the community. This connects back to the idea that contextual factors such as seeing other Queer adults might have influenced Gleaves process with identity. Gleaves continues to describe his identity in context with historical influences. He remembers,

> You don't get told about, "Oh these are, there was a same sex couple and they lived in such and such area of the county and they lived there for a long time together and they farmed or they did this, and…" You know you don't have that kind of history in stories that you get in your family where we're from…" (*Country Queers, Podcast Season 2 Episode 4*)

Community histories whether visible or invisible influence how people learn about their own identities. In a rural community that may lack visible Queer histories, the challenge becomes how does a lack of history impact a human's identity journey.

Matthew Shepard's and Brandon Teena's stories can add to the narrative around the influence of histories in connection to rural Queer identity work. The overkilling of Shepard and Teena generated fears amongst Queer people living in rural areas. These histories expose how tragic Queer histories can challenge local place histories. Gray (2009) describes the impact of Shepard and Teena's murders by stating, "…news and film narratives placed Brandon and Matthew as young queers in the wrong place at the wrong time" (p.114). This history that is placed on rural communities, creates a visible

narrative that it was not about a sexual or gender identity. Instead, it was simply, “wrong place at the wrong time.” Gruenewald (2003) questions how places and people have been harmed while also challenging who gets to and who has existed in certain places. If places do not value Queer identity, then that identity may be erased from narratives of those spaces. This erasing of identity in connection to overkill illustrates how histories can be negotiated around identity work. Oswald (2002) writes, “Identity is necessarily relational, meaning who one is in a given context is shaped in part by who or what one is interacting with” (p.341). Therefore, the objects of study point to a theme around how visibility in connection to our local histories and having to compartmentalize parts of our self may influence how people’s identities develop.

Fears and Spaces of Violence

Following the histories of place and the narratives of Shepard and Teena, the final theme that emerged was how the binaries of visibility can generate fears and spaces of violence. The overkill of Shepard and Teena serve as rural Queer histories that still produce fear in the lives of all Queer people inhabiting rural spaces. After reporting the rape to police, Teena was still murdered weeks later which also uncovers the fears of Queer people in rural spaces having to rely on police or county politics for any feeling of safety or justice. Abelson (2019) noted how often Brandon Teena’s narrative came up when interviewing trans men in rural spaces. She writes, “Again, Brandon Teena’s story came up frequently and tied the men’s fears to rural spaces, which made for a heightened fear of vulnerability to transgender-based violence overall” (p. 146). Teena’s histories allowed him to live past his overkill and influence as a sense of fear in trans people who are exploring their own gender.

In Gray (2009), the students faced harassment when performing Drag at the local Walmart. Shortly after the Walmart incident the students received an email that read: “I HATE FAGGOTS. KISS MY STRAIGHT ASS” along with several others (p. 113). These high levels of bullying and harassment based on the highly visible practice of performing drag and then publicly displaying that on the internet, created a moment for harassment that was visible by *unseen* people on the internet. Abelson continues this conversation by stating, “Across the interviews, fears of homophobia, racism, and transphobia was higher in rural spaces” (p. 146). In the context of rurality, Queer people have real fears when it comes to protections and safety because of the higher levels of victimization and the levels of overkill in rural areas.

Implications for Educational Spaces

Increase Visibility

Every classroom will have a Queer student. Every school will have a Queer educator. Every school will have a Queer caregiver. Through these broad assumptions, educators, policymakers, and communities can better support Queerness in rural

spaces. The social constructs of visibility in regard to both rural and Queer identities, suggest that there is no monolithic way to *see* rural Queerness. In other words, based on some rural spaces' community norms, some students may remain in the closet for safety, or present outwardly one way while internally questioning their gender and sexual identity. Policymakers, caregivers, and educators do not have to see Queerness from another person to understand that Queerness exists in those spaces.

Addressing Bias

Teacher preparation programs and professional development in rural areas should be geared towards addressing cis-heterosexual biases in practice and policy. There is much discomfort for rural educators to engage in topics of gender or sexuality mostly due to fear of community or parental backlash (Page, 2017); therefore, there is a strong need for these programs and PD's to help educate rural educators on gender identities and sexual orientations. For example, a masculine presenting student may not use he/him pronouns. If a rural school only uses canonical text that have cis-gendered people and heterosexual relationships, such as *The Great Gatsby*, how can Queer youth see their future selves? As a resource for teachers in rural areas, over half of the thirteen winners of the Whippoorwill award, a young adult (YA) novel award with a focus on rural spaces, featured gay, lesbian, or questioning characters (Kedley et al., 2022).

Creating Inherently Safe Spaces

While having visible Pride flags and stickers in the classroom are symbols of safe spaces, schools themselves should inherently be a safe space. Schools may workshop various ways to be visibility affirming that embrace the Queer community instead of trying to create "other safe spaces" for Queer students. The objects of study also provide a narrative that Queer visibility may not always translate to safety; therefore, having various other ways to celebrate Queerness in schools is critical to Queer youth feeling loved and cared for.

For example, when discussing contemporary histories and laws, a teacher may introduce the *Don't Ask, Don't Tell* bill under the Bill Clinton administration. Operating under the assumption that human rights should not be up for debate, a teacher may ask during a discussion or writing prompt: How do policies and laws such as this one influence people's identity and sense of belonging?

In spaces where Queer visibility and safe spaces may be limited due to anti-Queer policies, online resources may be more vital. Educators may take time to learn about online resources for families, colleagues, and youth. Examples of these resources: The Trevor Project, Movement Advancement Project (lgbtqmap.org/equality-maps), GLSEN educator guides and resources, and Learning for Justice).

Discussion

As students and educators navigate their comfort levels of visibility, educators and school personnel must implement various ways to communicate gender and sexual identities in the context of rural areas. For example, if a teacher asks students for pronouns, instead of risking outing the student, a teacher could ask on a questionnaire: *Which name/pronouns do you want me [educator] to use? When I talk to your caregivers, which name/pronouns would you like me to use? If I'm speaking to other teachers or administrators, which name/pronouns are you comfortable with me using?* This guides an understanding that Queer visibility does operate in a state of flux depending on the other participants and contexts.

The work of being Queer affirming in rural spaces is not solely rooted in providing safety, which most rural Queer youth feel unsafe (Kosciw et al., 2022) it is about creating moments and spaces in which rural Queerness is accepted, seen, and valued. Independent reading allows students a chance to explore their gender and sexual identities through narrative. A focus to increase Queer-affirming library holdings in rural spaces gives students the chance and opportunity to be seen. A short warm-up at the beginning of a science or math class featuring a Queer scientist or mathematician thriving in their career as an adult, gives Queer youth the hope of a future in which they are accepted and valued. Historically, cis-heterosexual educators have used their families to create relationships with students and to humanize the craft of teaching (e.g., simply having a photo of their family on their desk); however, anti-Queer policies complicate the ability for Queer educators to do the same. By acknowledging that families in rural areas also may look and operate differently (e.g., youth raised by their grandparents, same-sex parents, youth in foster systems, multi-racial households, etc.), regardless of Queerness, the classroom can inheritably become more accepting by valuing all humans in a community.

Conclusion

Rurality and Queerness offer a critical intersectional point of identity in which visibility cannot easily fit into a binary. Abelson (2019) and Gray (2009), *Country Queers* and the histories of Matthew Shepard and Brandon Teena in conversation together generate a spectrum of visibility. This spectrum of visibility operates at a variety of levels: within objects, in language and discourse, histories, within communities, online spaces, self (internal and body), in interactions, and intuitions. The Queer studies and place as an area of identity construction framework allowed the objects of study to highlight these various spaces of visibility. Through this narrative inquiry around the function of visibility, the themes that presented themselves were associated with a sense of comfort, production of spaces, identity development work, and a sense of fear and violence. By challenging the role of what it means to make some visible, these themes create points of conversation. Does a spectrum of Queer visibility in rural spaces produce a sense of

comfort to people in that space? How visibility in the rural Queer context influences and shapes the identity work process? Does Queer rural studies consider how visibility functions during the production of new and current spaces? How does fear and levels of violence in rural Queer conversations influence a level of visibility? These questions push future discourses to challenge what it means to provide visibility of a historically marginalized group in a rural context.

It is not as simple as being either visible or invisible because Queer people exist in a society deeply rooted in cis-heterosexual existence. Therefore, visibility for Queer people sometimes takes cis-heteronormativity into consideration. For example, the coming out narrative creates Queer visibility under the gaze of heteronormativity. A spectrum of visibility allows a flux of identity to be seen or unseen based on the individual. Queer rurality, with its histories, interactions, and communities offers a site of queering the binary of something or someone being visible.

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About the Author

Clint Whitten is a doctoral student in Foundations of Education at Virginia Tech with a focus on the intersections of Queerness and rurality. He has taught middle school English, creative writing, and theatre and is currently teaching a social educational foundations course at Virginia Tech. He also helps implement youth initiatives at the Center for Rural Education at Virginia Tech.

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The Perceptions of Female Superintendents within a Rural County in a Midwestern State

Travis Dimmitt, *Northwest Missouri State University*

Linda Gray Smith, *Northwest Missouri State University*

This paper discusses the perceptions of seven of the eight women to serve as school superintendents within a rural county in a Midwestern state from 1986 to 2021. From interviews with the women, we identified themes and compared and connected the thematic perceptions of the rural female superintendents to the overall framework of extant literature on the female superintendent experience across the United States. Throughout this process, we found that much of what the rural female superintendents we interviewed experienced in their jobs matched the experiences of other women superintendents across the country. There were, however, some divergent experiences from established literature in key areas. This paper highlights many of those similarities and differences.

***Keywords*: rural, female, women, superintendents, administration**

Historically, those who hold the position of school superintendent are, most often, men (Tallerico & Blount, 2004; Miller et al., 2006). Sawchuck (2022) decried that "women – the backbone and brain trust of America's public schools – are vastly underrepresented in the superintendent's chair" (para. 1). White (2021) discussed major gaps in the percentage of female superintendents versus male superintendents across the United States. Derrington and Sharrat (2009) noted that the percentage of female superintendents in the United States increased from 12% in the late 1990s to 22% by 2006. Despite that increase, across the United States it was clear that "the number of women achieving a superintendent position does not match the pool of talented women who are qualified for and would succeed in the job of superintendent" (Derrington & Sharrat, 2009, p. 8). Gammill and Vaughn (2011) noted that even within the framework of study on female superintendents, the perceptions of those women who hold superintendencies in rural areas are often underdocumented. So, although the "legacy of discrimination" (Miller et al., 2006, p. 11) when it comes to women in the role of school superintendent is pervasive across the United States, is it necessarily pervasive in every geographical setting within the country?

The geographical setting for this study was a county in a Midwestern state. The county is rural, classified officially by the United States Office of Management and Budget as “nonmetro” (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2019). As of 2020, the county had 21,241 total residents (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023). The county seat was, by far, the largest population center in the county, with a population of 10,914—nearly half of the county total (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023). The rest of the county’s population is scattered among various small towns and farmsteads. No other town in the county tops even 1,000 residents (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023).

The county seat serves as the business hub of the area. It is to this city that people in the 878 square mile county come to shop at Walmart or eat at McDonalds. Although gas can be purchased in the outlying areas of the county, fuel prices are more affordable when one makes the drive to the county seat. Work among families in the school districts is often agriculture related, usually where corn and beans are grown. Cattle are raised on the rolling hillsides of the countryside.

The population throughout the county is declining, reflecting the decline prevalent in rural areas of the United States since at least the 1940s (Johnson & Lichter, 2019). This decline is particularly noticeable in the agriculture-based population of the smaller communities outside of the county seat. Overall, the population density of the county in 2020 was 24.2 individuals per square mile. This represents nearly a 10 percent decline from 2010, when the population density of the county was 26.6 individuals per square mile (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.). Across the United States, a school consolidation movement beginning in the 1930s reduced the number of school districts in the country from 128,000 to 16,000 by the 1980s with rural schools bearing the brunt of these consolidations (DeYoung & Howley, 1990, p. 63). In the rural county that is the geographical setting of this study, there are seven school districts situated either fully or partially inside the county’s borders. The seven current school districts were all born from this aforementioned consolidation movement during the 1950s and 1960s. This consolidation impacted attendance centers for the school districts. One of the districts in our study—the district centered in the county seat—serves a community with multiple attendance sites based on grade configuration: elementary, middle school, secondary school, and vocational school. Two districts in the study have K-12 grade buildings that are connected and share a gymnasium and lunchroom. Two of the small districts have attendance centers in two towns approximately 5 miles apart: an elementary attendance center and a secondary attendance center.

Each district represented in the study has athletic teams and music programs. The county seat district offers multiple highly successful sports, along with band and choir programs that successfully compete in show choir and marching exhibitions. The other districts’ students play eight-man football, basketball, track, volleyball, softball, and

baseball. Many of these athletic activities are shared programs involving two or three of the rural districts.

Each district struggles to attract and retain teachers. Student teachers have been hired to be the teacher of record in at least five of the county's school districts (C. Barr, personal communication, August 2022). Many teachers in the districts are members of families who have lived in the area their whole lives. Teachers in these districts hold well-paying jobs, providing insurance for those who live in the rural areas (Heller, 2021). Overall, these are not wealthy school districts. The state funding formula depends primarily on the assessed valuation of the property within the district borders (Rinehart, 2016).

School boards of the smaller districts have discovered hiring local administrators of whom they have first-hand knowledge to be a solid practice to maintain quality superintendents. Many times, recruitment and promotion to the superintendency is from the building principal to the superintendent's desk (P. Warner, personal communication, July 2022).

From at least the time of district consolidation in the 1950s and 1960s until the 1980s, only men held superintendent positions across the county. The county's first female school superintendent was hired in 1986. Since then, eight different women have held the title of school superintendent in the county. Three of the county's school districts have employed two female school superintendents during that time. Two county school districts have employed one female school superintendent. Two districts within the county have employed only males in that position to date.

Four women who held superintendent positions in the county's school districts held the position at other districts as well in their careers, though to date, no woman has been a superintendent in more than one district within the county. The first woman to hold a superintendency in the county did so alone. No other woman was hired as a school superintendent in the county during the time she served. Every other woman who has served as superintendent at a county school has worked with at least one other woman at some point during her tenure.

Having employed eight women as superintendents in the previous 36 years, is this rural county in a Midwestern state ahead of the curve when it comes to trends across the United States involving female superintendents? What are the perceptions of the women who have actually held the job? We decided to go directly to the source and interview as many of these women as we could to compare their personal experiences as superintendents to those of other female superintendents around the nation.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study was to explore whether the perceptions of those women who have held the job of school superintendent within a rural county in a Midwestern state match the trends found in literature for female superintendents across the rest of the United States. Our research question was: Would the personal experiences of serving as superintendents, as shared by women in a rural county in a Midwestern state, dovetail with what other women superintendents have noticed and experienced around the nation?

Conceptual Framework

Our conceptual framework for this study revolves around synergistic leadership theory (SLT) (Brown & Irby, 2003). Whereas other leadership theories have maximized the experiences of white males while largely excluding the female experience in leadership positions (Holtkamp et al., 2007), SLT was "developed by female researchers, utilized a female sample, and included the female perspective" (Brown & Irby, 2003, p. 102). It is a theory approach "inclusive to female leaders' experiences and voices yet applicable to both male and female leaders" (Brown & Irby, 2003, p. 103). SLT proposes that when considering leaders, "it is important to embrace a holistic perspective of the context of leadership and organizations" (Brown & Irby, 2003, p. 101).

There are four factors of leadership according to SLT:

Factor 1 – Attitudes, Beliefs, and Values.

Factor 2 – Leadership Behaviors.

Factor 3 – External Factors.

Factor 4 – Organizational Structure.

SLT posits that each of the four factors is interconnected with the others. Organizational and leadership success comes when the four factors are in harmony with one another. Strife in organizations or among leaders comes when any factor is out of balance in comparison to the other factors (Brown & Irby, 2003, p. 103).

The SLT method of examining attitudes, beliefs, and values was attractive to us as researchers on the rural female superintendent experience because it recognizes that "female leaders may be impacted by external forces, organizational structures, or values, attitudes, and beliefs in ways male leaders are not" (Brown & Irby, 2003, p. 102). Similarly, though we believe leadership behaviors that are traditionally thought of as either male or female exist, in fact, on a continuum and are not limited to any one particular gender, nonetheless, SLT recognizes that leadership behaviors of women in positions of authority may differ contextually from their male counterparts. This context means that external factors and organizational structure may impact women in different ways than men when

it comes to decision-making in leadership positions (Brown & Irby, 2003, p. 102). Thus, we sought to apply the factors of SLT to real-life situations when considering the responses of the rural female superintendents in our study.

Methodology

As previously mentioned, the following question guided our research: Would the personal experiences of serving as superintendents, as shared by women in a rural county in a Midwestern state, dovetail with what other women superintendents have noticed and experienced around the nation? At least in part, this study was born via our personal experiences. One author served as a teacher in two of the county's districts when they were led by female superintendents. The other author was a female superintendent in a neighboring county at the same time that many of the women we interviewed served. Therefore, we wanted the study to be qualitative in nature as we wished to delve into the mindsets of the rural county's female superintendents. Thus, we chose to engage our subjects in a process of "exploring and understanding the meaning individuals . . . ascribe to a social or human problem" (Creswell, 2014, p. 4). Because the study consisted of interviews with participants and personal responses to written questions, this study was a qualitative case study of a bounded system. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) explained "the single most defining characteristic of case study research lies in delimiting the object of study" (p. 38). Because the study focused on a group of people in a specific location during a specified time period, it is a bounded system because one can "fence in" the participants (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 38). In this study, the eight female superintendents in the rural county of the selected Midwestern state who served between 1986 and 2022 were approached for participation in the study. We contacted the women via email to determine their interest in participating. Of the eight women we contacted, seven agreed to participate in the study.

Before our interviews, we explored numerous books and journal articles to find emergent themes in literature about female superintendents across the United States. Based on this literature review, we developed an interview document focusing on the experiences encountered by female superintendents and/or superintendents serving in a rural area. We then interviewed seven of the eight women who held the position of superintendent in the county about their experiences in the role. Using the set of predetermined questions, we interviewed five of the individual participants in a face-to-face meeting. The interviews were recorded and transcribed by a transcription service. The two remaining participants were unable to schedule a time to meet with us and responded to the questions via email. From there, we revisited our conversations, seeking themes in the women's experiences. Finally, we determined which themes that emerged from our conversations matched the national narrative and which themes did not. Overall, we found that much of what the rural female superintendents we interviewed experienced in their jobs matched the experiences of other women superintendents across the

country. There were, however, some divergent experiences from established literature in key areas.

Literature Review

Different themes began to emerge as we processed and coded our interviews with the women superintendents of the county. In particular, our subjects expressed multiple thoughts around the areas of discrimination, leadership styles, career paths, and locations, and mentorship. This section highlights key points on each of these themes that we found in our review of national literature.

Discrimination

Sawchuck (2022) discussed the idea that education researchers have for many years tried to make sense of reasons why a field whose workforce is so heavily dominated by women should have such a low percentage of women in the top position. Much of the extant literature regarding female superintendents in the United States mentions the presence of discrimination in culture and attitudes or discriminatory practices in hiring as reasons why there are so many more men than women employed in the superintendent position. Shakeshaft (1989) noted that even those who research superintendent trends often fall into this mindset as “the funding of research, the objects of study, and the use of research have been to date dominated by white males” (p. 324). Shakeshaft also said that, as a “nondominant group,” women have often been “unrepresented” in research concerning those in school leadership positions (p. 324). Estler (1975) referred to a “deeply instilled pattern of societal discrimination that affects the aspirations of women” related to their seeking jobs as superintendents (p. 366). Sawchuck offered statistics to bolster this argument when he said that although women earn two-thirds of leadership degrees in education, only about one of every four superintendent jobs is held by a woman. Sharp et al. (2004) discussed the ideas of discrimination toward women as not necessarily being overt. Rather, discriminatory practices are built into systems that perpetuate the hiring of men as superintendents even though the overwhelming majority of teachers are women. Indeed, Webb (2018) noted that “women outnumber men nearly three-to-one in education; however, when it comes to educational administration, the statistics are nearly identically reversed” (p. 6).

Leadership Styles

Eagly et al. (2003) found that though women are often in the minority when it comes to holding top-level leadership positions, their overall leadership style tends to be more transformational in nature than their male counterparts, who tend to be more transactional in nature. Within the framework of existing literature, for the most part, female superintendents downplayed gender-based leadership styles. Instead, they believed multidimensional leadership styles allowed them to deal with the complexities of the superintendency. Reed and Patterson (2007) noted leadership styles were not

perceived to be based on gender but on feminine–masculine types of leadership traits found in both male and female superintendents. Pounder and Coleman (2002) echoed this sentiment when they wrote that "de-coupling gender from biological sex allows for the female leader to exhibit male gender qualities and vice versa" (p. 124). Although collaboration and caring are typically considered feminine traits, male superintendents also display skills in collaboration and caring. The leadership styles for both female and male superintendents appear to be based on the situation rather than on gender (Reed & Patterson, 2007, p. 92). There was a reference, however, to the perceived need for men to be the "winner" in the event of conflict whereas women are perhaps more comfortable trying something different to reach the goal (Reed & Patterson, 2007, p. 98). Another study of female superintendents confirmed the need for superintendents to deal with multitudes of situations, to be the "jack of all trades" as the top officer of a school district (McCabe, 2001). In that vein, Palladino et al. (2007) noted that successful rural superintendents commonly possess a myriad of skills in multiple areas, including relationship-building, moral responsibility, and instructional leadership while Wilson (2010) mentioned that rural superintendents must constantly balance the areas of management, administration, and communication in order to be effective leaders.

Career Paths, Family Considerations, and Location

Tallerico and Blount (2004) explored the reasons individuals seek certain positions. They cited Carlson's perspective that individuals seek jobs based on the position's desirability (p. 654). Gullo and Sperandio (2020) found, however, that the most desirable administrative positions in education are often closed off to women or, at the very least, harder to obtain. Speaking about all open superintendent jobs but especially about desirable jobs for women outside of the districts in which they currently worked, the authors specifically noted that "women must choose not to aspire (to the job of superintendent) or to prepare themselves for possible gender bias in hiring when applying as outsiders" (Gullo & Sperandio, 2020, p. 1).

Garn and Brown (2008) found the overwhelming number of female superintendents in their research had begun their careers as elementary teachers and that their first administrative jobs in education had most often been as elementary principals. This typical career arc for women in education had ample potential for closing them out of superintendent jobs. Glass (n.d.) noted that most superintendents had administrative jobs at the secondary level prior to coming into their superintendent positions.

Location and the idea of staying close to home might be a factor for how women seek superintendent positions as well. Sharp et al. (2004) indicated that in surveying women superintendents for their research, most of those women surveyed felt that men were more mobile than women in applying for superintendent positions. The majority agreed that women sometimes do not apply for superintendent positions because they

might not want to spend too much time away from home. Lack of encouragement from the community, family members, or peers was considered to be a barrier, but the majority of the women surveyed did not feel restricted by family to seek the superintendent position and would encourage their daughters and sons to become school superintendents (Sharp et al., 2004, p. 31). Of the women surveyed who were in central office positions, only 4.7% indicated their families would be unwilling to relocate (Brunner & Kim, 2010, p. 297). Nonetheless, Derrington and Sharratt (2009) indicated that family considerations were a major factor as to why many women chose not to pursue superintendent positions (p. 9), with Sandberg (2013) acknowledging that women were "more likely to accommodate a partner's career than the other way around" (p. 62). Superville (2017) said the potential instability in a superintendent job in relation to family time meant that some women simply don't want it. They prefer teaching and being close to students. The hours are punishing, school board politics can be brutal, and public scrutiny is intense. The average superintendent stays on the job less than five years. For some women, that uncertainty is not worth uprooting their families (p. 15).

Mentorship

A mentor is defined as a person "who offers knowledge, insight, perspective, or wisdom that is helpful to another person in a relationship which goes beyond duty or obligation" (University of California Davis, 2018). The various aspects of the mentor's role include being an advisor, critical friend, guide, listener, role model, sounding board, strategist, supporter, and teacher who asks questions, challenges productively, encourages risk taking, offers encouragement, provides feedback, promotes independence, and shares critical knowledge. The Wallace Foundation (2006) espoused the need for support and development to meet the demand of the schools and communities they lead. The relationship is mutually beneficial as both the mentor and mentee benefit from the relationship in terms of increased satisfaction with, knowledge of, and wisdom to support the individual (Talley & Henry, 2008).

With a focus on leaders in rural regions, support in the form of mentoring, coaching, and peer networks are critical (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006). Developing sustainable leadership in rural areas is a challenge and should be a priority for state and national leaders (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006). For schools to ride the waves of reform requires skilled, competent, and stable leadership. Support in the form of mentoring, coaching, and peer networks is therefore imperative. More specifically in studies of female superintendents, it was found that more than 70% of female superintendents indicated they have individuals to help them gain the competencies required of the position (Brunner & Kim, 2010, p. 293). In many cases, however, it is males who mentor female superintendents. For example, Reed and Patterson (2007) found that mentors for female superintendents in their study were all men (p. 96). The lack of a representative professional network was considered as detrimental in some circles. For example, 53%

of those who participated in Sharp et al.'s (2004) study considered the lack of an influential sponsor somewhat of a barrier (p. 29).

Findings

Discrimination - What We Found Within a Rural County in a Midwestern State

In the rural county in a Midwestern state, hiring practices for superintendents before the 1980s were, if anything, more draconian than in other schools across the United States. National trends saw a high of 11% of school superintendents as female in 1930, with a low of 1.3% in 1971 (Sharp et al., 2004, p. 22). As stated before, we found no evidence of superintendents in the county who were anything other than White and male prior to 1986. Therefore, did those women who occupied the superintendent positions in the county experience discrimination after 1986? If so, how?

The majority of those in our study felt they were not discriminated against during their time as superintendents, though the consensus of all participants was that such discrimination did exist, even if they had not experienced it themselves. No superintendent spoke of discrimination within the hiring process. One superintendent felt people "sometimes deferred to me because I was a woman in certain instances, but there was no harassment, nothing like that went on with other (female) superintendents."

Two women specifically said they experienced discrimination from colleagues in their roles as principals but not as superintendents. One interview subject said that, as a superintendent, neither she nor her male colleagues in the county ever worried about gender roles in their leadership positions.

> Those gentlemen, when I first started my career as a superintendent, that were the surrounding superintendents, (were) just a great group of people. So I guess what I would say to being a superintendent in (the county), I didn't know that there was a gender. I mean, we were just all friends, we were all colleagues, we worked together for the students in the area, and that was a real priority for the group. I came into the group at a time when things were changing. And so we were all working together to try to provide opportunities for the kids and to better their educational experience. So as far as being a female or a male, I really wouldn't have much.

Of the seven women we were able to interview, only one spoke of discriminatory experiences while she was superintendent. For her, the experiences of discrimination were sometimes direct. For example, one board member "was extremely chauvinistic and would try to use the, 'honey, dear.' Call me up and advise me what I needed to do, but in a really condescending way that he would never do to a man."

Mostly, however, the discrimination this superintendent experienced was the result of a confidence gap in her abilities to lead as a woman versus if she had been a man.

Much of that confidence gap was in the areas of athletics, construction, and maintenance—areas that tend to be in the traditional male sphere of influence.

> The school district that I was in was very sports-oriented, and that's always something. That's often some area that people aren't sure how you're going to feel about it. There's a difference there, too, about how you're approached about athletics versus academics, or however you want to look at that. Those are some of the things. Anything that had to do with construction, man jobs. I just felt that they weren't as confident in a female, at least at the beginning until I showed them I could communicate with big burly men, that kind of thing. Those are some examples. But, yes. And perhaps I'm sensitive, but I don't think so. I may be sensitive, but those were real things.

Leadership Styles - What We Found Within a Rural County in a Midwestern State

Six of the seven female superintendents in our study indicated beliefs that they, as individuals or through their work, were not perceived differently as a superintendent because of their gender. One female superintendent did voice that the school community was watchful to see if she supported athletics and could manage building projects. Another woman in our study indicated the board of education was helpful to her in building projects where she had little background. She asked the board members questions to build her knowledge as she was managing building maintenance projects.

Another female participant spoke of having leadership discussions with her successor, who was male, after she had moved on to another position. Refuting much of the literature we read, traditional gender roles regarding the perceived strengths of women and men in relation to the superintendency was sometimes a topic of discussion.

> We would talk school sometimes, but he professed that he was, and I think this is true of a lot of males that become superintendents, that their strong suit is budget, buses, and basketball . . . I think that is kind of the same feeling that is out there a lot with . . . big schools and the superintendents that get into the big schools, that their main thing is those three things . . . that is where their strength is. I think most women have strengths in working with people and being able to relate to kids and their needs because that's the way women are. When a woman is looking for a leadership position, they're looking for a leadership position that wants what they have to offer.

Career Paths, Family Considerations, and Location - What We Found Within a Rural County in a Midwestern State

In our study, it appears that being known in the community was a factor in the hiring of the women to serve as school superintendent. Of the seven women we interviewed in our study, three had been elementary principals in the districts where they later served as superintendents. At least one female superintendent we interviewed recognized that being a "known commodity" was instrumental in leading her to the superintendent's job.

> I had been in the school district as an elementary principal for seven years. In a way it wasn't like a new situation because people knew me, I think they respected me, and there wasn't really any problems going into the superintendency that way and the questions that people might've had, if they had been hiring somebody they didn't know, those questions just didn't exist.

Two of the women we interviewed had been teachers in the district where they later became superintendents. Both former teachers were known in the community, went elsewhere to be administrators, and then came back to serve in the district's top position. The remaining two female superintendents interviewed were unknown to the community when they came to the area under study, but one of those women was promoted to the superintendency in a previous district outside of the county where she was known as a teacher, an assistant middle school principal, and the high school principal.

Two of the superintendents in our survey indicated that family considerations were a factor in their decision of when and where to seek a superintendency. One expressed that the location of the superintendency where she served was a good fit for her family, whereas another, though approached by multiple districts to consider applying for the superintendency, expressed that she waited until her children were older before she sought the superintendency: "So I just continued as assistant superintendent until my kids were older and high-school age where they could manage themselves."

Mentorship – What We Found Within a Rural County in a Midwestern State

Two individuals who were serving as principals in their previous districts indicated their bosses at the time urged them to become superintendents. In one district, a female superintendent was actively involved in assisting the female principal in learning budgeting and other aspects of school management.

> (When) I was a principal, I worked with (another female superintendent in the rural county), and she encouraged me to go onto my superintendency, just worked really closely with her. And was always interested in budgeting and just asked a lot of questions. And I think she just saw that as maybe someone who should go into that. So I did that and then applied for a little tiny school and they happened to hire me.

In another district within the rural county, a male superintendent became a strong advocate and mentor once he learned that our interview subject, who was principal of the district's elementary school at the time, was interested in assuming the superintendency after some initial reluctance.

> (Members of the school board) asked me if I was going to apply. And I was like, uh, no, I don't know anything about being a superintendent, I don't want any part of that. And a couple of weeks went by and they interviewed a couple of candidates. And while they were good candidates, they weren't really what they thought they wanted. But I think what they wanted was for me to say I would do it. So then I became fearful. I remember being fearful that, oh my gosh, all these people that I work with and myself may not like what we get. So, okay, I'm going to talk to him, I'm going to do it . . .
>
> And they pretty much led me to do that. (The previous superintendent) didn't want to leave me to do anything I didn't want to do. But then once I said I would do it, he was like, it's going to be fine. You need to do this. And so then he was very helpful. He just thought I really didn't want to do it. And then I told him, I went and confided in him that I would do it if he thought I could. And then he was like, uh, yeah, I think you'd be fine. And the rest is history, I guess.

A third woman in our study was also an elementary principal in her district when the previous male superintendent announced his plan to retire. His public support and advocacy helped convince the school board to hire her as his successor although his later election to the district's school board complicated their relationship.

> My predecessor is probably the reason that I was (selected) as well because when he retired, he gave them my support. He encouraged me to apply for (the job), and he supported me. The turbulent times came when he wanted to do the job . . . I didn't do things exactly the way that he would have wanted them done, and I had my own ideas and sometimes they didn't match with his.

Discussion

Overall, we can say the perceptions of female superintendents within a rural county in a Midwestern state regarding their jobs much of the time followed the general thematic trend of literature from around the United States. Within those themes, however, there were occasional deviations or nuanced differences worth noting. For example, although the women interviewed recognized that discrimination and bias exist in the hiring process for female superintendents, none of our subjects spoke of this bias within the context of their own hiring. Only one spoke of the discrimination she experienced on the job itself. In the area of leadership style, at least one of our interview subjects passionately spoke of separate female and male traits that she felt influenced women and men in how they approached the superintendent position although much of the national literature has not

spoken of female- or male-style leadership but of leadership styles on a masculine/feminine continuum.

When speaking of career paths and family considerations, a majority of the female superintendents indicated being previously known within the community preceded their hirings in the county. Those local ties also created family considerations that likely affected employment mobility for the majority of the women we interviewed. This situation matched much of what we read in the national literature.

Regarding mentorship, in at least one district in the rural county, there was one strong female-to-female mentor/mentee relationship that eventually led the mentee to seek her own superintendency. Most mentor/mentee relationships the participants highlighted were male superintendents mentoring women who would eventually assume superintendent positions. The majority of the women we interviewed did not mention specific mentors. This situation also matched much of what we read in the national literature.

Conclusion

For our research, we were able to successfully interview seven of the eight women who have served as superintendents in school districts within a rural county in a Midwestern state. Some of what they told us bucked national trends, especially their own perceptions regarding the theme of discrimination toward women seeking superintendent positions. We recognize, however, that we were able to interview only the women who "broke through" and earned their positions. Perhaps there were women who interviewed for superintendent jobs in the county and were not hired. Furthermore, there are likely many women who would be wonderful fits as superintendents in the county but, for various systemic reasons, have been unable to pursue those positions. It seems likely the perceptions of these women who were either passed over, or never got their chance, would differ from those who have served. Further research would be beneficial to shed light on these women's stories. In addition, more research on the perceptions of female superintendents in other rural counties around the nation would serve to highlight potential nuances of the rural female superintendent experience versus that of women who have served as superintendents of urban or suburban districts.

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About the Authors

Travis Dimmitt, **Ed. D**., is an assistant professor in the School of Education at Northwest Missouri State University. His career in education has been defined by his experience in rural areas. Prior to coming to Northwest Missouri State, he taught middle school and high school social studies for many years in rural Missouri, and was eventually chosen as a STARR teacher (Select Teacher as Regional Resource) by the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. In this position, he traveled across the state, offering teaching training and techniques to hundreds of teachers in multiple districts, most of them rural. From there, he became a middle school and high school principal in rural Missouri. At Northwest Missouri State, Travis teaches classes in classroom management and curriculum to undergraduate education students. He also teaches graduate classes to educators seeking administration degrees. dimmitt@nwmissouri.edu

Linda Gray Smith, **Ph.D**., is an associate professor in the School of Education at Northwest Missouri State University. Linda teaches middle school, secondary content, and K–12 undergraduate curriculum courses and classroom management. Educational Leadership students are enrolled in courses that she authored and teaches in the Master's and Specialists programs. Linda also coordinates the secondary education classes and advises middle school education majors. In collaboration with others, she

has published articles, a book chapter, and presented at professional conferences at the international, national, regional and state levels. She has served as a K–12 administrator and a high school English teacher. Lsmith@nwmissouri.edu

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The Effects of Distance Learning on Teachers in a Rural Title I Elementary Education Setting

Chelsey Walters, *Tulsa Community College*

Alesha Baker, *Northeastern State University*

Michele Shell, *Northeastern State University*

Following the sudden switch from in-person to distance learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, much research has been conducted about student learning. However, little information is available about the perception of rural teachers during this time. In this qualitative study, researchers interviewed three rural Title I elementary school teachers. Through thematic qualitative analysis, researchers found that there is an intimate link between the rural community's beliefs about education and the way the teachers perceive their roles in distance learning. The teachers in rural communities view learning and teaching as a social activity that was inhibited by the challenges faced during distance learning despite the support of the community and administration. Teachers overwhelmingly felt that the distance in distance learning inhibited the ability for them to teach and concluded that true learning happens best in an in-person setting.

***Keywords*: education, teacher perception, social learning, distance learning, technology**

With the COVID-19 pandemic came an immediate need to switch to distance learning. This sudden switch to distance learning was trying for many, rural educators included. The transition from in-person to online teaching occurred without warning, without knowledge of how long teachers could expect to teach in a distance learning format, without initial resources, and without a formal plan. As a result, educators across the world made a swift change in the way that they had to approach teaching (Bojović et al., 2020). Many learned that much of what "worked" in the physical classroom was a product of the physical classroom, leaving teachers uncertain of what pedagogical tools could work in this new educational space. Teachers were left to navigate the waters of online teaching alone.

For the researchers of this study, this posed the question: in the era of COVID-19 pandemic and distance learning, how did the shift from in-person teaching to distance

learning affect teachers? The researchers sought to answer this question in regard to rural elementary school teachers specifically, with three research questions: (1) What were the expectations of the teachers during distance learning in a specific Title I rural school?; (2) What challenges were faced by teachers during distance learning in the Title I rural school that hindered the ability to meet the expectations?; and (3) What support was in place concerning distance learning to help teachers in the Title1 rural school meet expectations?

While previous investigations studied how rural teachers use technology (Croft & Moore, 2019; Gray et al., 2010), these investigations did not examine rural teachers' perceptions of expectations in the context of emergency distance learning. Additionally, Kormos and Wisdom (2020) examined online pandemic teaching in a rural setting; however, their quantitative study focused primarily on the digital divide. This study employed a qualitative approach and was unique in that the researchers focused not on the roles of and ramifications for parents (Abuhammad, 2020; Dong, 2020; Wu et al., 2020) and students (Azevedo et al., 2021; Brooks et al., 2020; Donnelly & Patrinos, 2021; Gore et al., 2021; Gonzalez et al., 2020; Kuhfeld et al., 2020; Pier et al., 2021) during distance learning, which largely constitutes the research to date, but instead on the expectations rural elementary teachers perceived during distance learning.

The purpose of this study is to examine the unique perspective of rural teachers' experiences during emergency distance learning, shedding light on the expectations teachers felt they needed to meet for students, parents, and administration along with the supports in place as well as the lack of support in meeting those perceived expectations. As the perspective of rural teachers during emergency pandemic distance learning is absent from current research, this research contributes to rural administrators' understanding of their teachers' perceived expectations so that these administrators can better support rural teachers should online teaching becomes necessary again. Additionally, the research provides insight as to the challenges faced by rural elementary educators during distance learning, which may influence future curricular considerations for teacher preparation programs.

Literature Review

Defining Rural: Setting and Context

Due to the difficulty in defining the term rural (Arnold et al., 2005; MacGregor-Fors & Vázquez, 2020; Sher, 1977), the researchers understand that different rural communities can hold different characteristics of the rural definition. Without disclosing any identifying markers to the particular school district under investigation, the researchers of this study have identified the district as "rural remote" (Johnson et al., 2021) due to the following features: a) the school district is classified as serving 1,000–1,999 students in the entire district by the state school report card (Profile Methodologies, 2019); b) the community is more than 25 miles from the nearest "urbanized area" as

defined by NCES (National Center for Education Statistics, 2006); and c) the community is more than 10 miles from the nearest “urban cluster” as defined by NCES (National Center for Education Statistics, 2006). The distinction among rural school types based on the proximity of a rural school to an urbanized area is an important characteristic when examining achievement scores across grade levels and subjects. Students in rural-remote schools, such as those attending the school in the present study, historically have been shown to have the lowest achievement scores among rural school types, which include rural-fringe (within 5 miles of an urbanized area), rural-distant (between 5 and 25 miles of an urbanized area), and rural-remote (25 miles or greater from an urbanized area) designations (Johnson et al., 2021).

While defining rural proves an area for further research in its own right, “rural districts have valuable stories to tell” (Sherwood, 2001, p. 1). Researchers of this study seek to share the valuable experiences of one rural district’s elementary school teachers. Keeping in mind the diversity of rural contexts, this study does not attempt a universal application to all rural situations, nor does the research attempt to compare this particular rural milieu to other rural contexts or its suburban or urban counterparts. The researchers do, however, attempt to demonstrate the elementary teachers' perceptions in a specific rural context during distance learning. As rural education proves to be severely under-researched (Arnold et al., 2005; Bryant, 2010; MacGregor-Fors & Vázquez, 2020; Sher, 1977; Sherwood, 2001), researching teacher perception during distance learning, specifically in a rural context and with a focus on the rural community, fills a current gap in research. As Sherwood (2001) points out:

> Missing information of this kind not only keeps us from learning more answers. It keeps us from asking the right questions. More solid and dependable information from and about rural schools would increase their ability to present a unified, powerful rural America to legislators and other policy makers. The lack of data insures [sic] that many rural issues will continue to be ignored. (p. 3)

This research aims to provide a space for three rural elementary educators to share their specific experiences during distance learning.

Perceptions of Rural Teachers

While Gutierrez de Blume and Bass (2021) focused on students’ identities being linked to their rural environment, the same concept can be applied to teachers, especially those teachers who have lived for their entire lives in the rural town in which they teach or who reside in the same rural community in which they teach. In these instances, teachers’ “roots are closely linked” to their [established] identities; as rural [teachers continue] to conceptualize their place in the world (Gutierrez de Blume & Bass, 2021, p. 285). Adding to the idea that teaching and learning is established to teachers’ social identities, Wertsch (1995) explains that “individuals have access to psychological tools and practices by virtue of being part of a sociocultural milieu in which those tools and

practices have been and continue to be culturally transmitted" (p. 141). Tofel-Grehl et al. (2021) found that in order to prevent cognitive overload for rural teachers, teachers need increased scaffolded professional development for learning new technology use. This phenomenon was identified through private reflection and may be due to "a lack of prior knowledge and experience teaching . . . technologies" (p. 56).

As teachers learned how to teach online as opposed to in person, teachers attempted to use teaching tools outside of their physical classroom as they taught apart from their colleagues and peers. Thus, their normal social environment was replaced with a more solitary version of teaching. When examining how they grappled with online teaching, it is important to note that positive teacher perception proves a key ingredient in successful use of technology in teaching (Chung, 2011; Edwards, 2016; Heath, 2017; Islim et al., 2018; Khlaif, 2018; Kormos & Wisdom, 2021; Prasojo et al., 2019; Yang & Kwok, 2017). It is the change of the sociocultural milieu, from in person to online, and the way in which teachers' perceptions, specifically rural teachers with their strong sense of community (Lyson, 2002; Sherwood, 2001; Tieken, 2014; Zuckerman, 2020), changed during distance learning that the research seeks to understand.

Sociocultural Theory

As there is no unifying theory that can be applied to the rural educational experience specifically, researchers approach the specificity of rurality through the lens of place. Pinar's (2015) idea of place supports the framework as the teachers of this study were specifically situated in a rural Title I elementary school setting. As Pinar points out, "Place is geographical . . . but it is also historical" (p. xii). Thus, the site of education extends beyond geography or a specific building. The place itself holds history and culture. This is especially poignant in rural towns, which tend to heavily value community. Thus, the interactions and perceptions of teachers are highly situated in the specific community of their rural setting. This idea that place and society form one's identity is supported by Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory. Johnson (2009) details the relevance of the theory: "Knowledge of the world is mediated by virtue of being situated in a cultural environment and it is from this cultural environment that humans acquire the representational systems that ultimately become the medium, mediator, and tools of thought" (p. 1). When considering the way in which distance learning affected teachers and the expectations teachers had, both expectations they have of themselves along with any perception of external expectations, one must consider the idea that learning is a social experience. Vygotsky's sociocultural theory considers the many ways in which teachers and students connect and interact with learning, viewing the activity of learning as a social one. In fact, Vygotsky (Penuel & Wertsch, 1995) describes this "living through" experience, *perezhivanie*, in which teachers are a part of an ecosystem of learning, explaining that it is the joint experience of learning that Michell (2016) extends to ideas of

identity, social emotional learning, classroom culture and dialogue, and the teachers' understanding of their own learning experience.

It would follow that teaching is also a social activity, characterized by teachers' own views on how the ecosystem of a classroom should look and feel. Further, Vygotsky (1978) characterizes teachers as mediators, a role that casts teachers as present and available to students to support learning, which can also be characterized by teachers' own perceptions on what that mediation looks like. Vygotsky describes the environment as a context that is key in generating learning, an environment that is carefully constructed and mediated by the teacher for the support of students, which, again, is partially dependent on the teacher's view of what constitutes a productive learning environment. The teacher's personal views on learning, her pedagogy, shapes the classroom environment and the learning experience for both the teacher and the students. This general expectation that teachers should be present to work closely with students and student groups proves to be the crux of expectation upon which much of the teacher expectations rest, making it the unifying theory that frames the research.

Keeping in mind that Johnson (2009) connected these ideas of sociocultural theory and teacher cognition when considering that this "can be understood only in light of the cultural practices and circumstances of their communities—which also change" (Rogoff, 2003, p. 3–4), the question of what a "present" teacher means becomes a question in itself. As the construction of these communities changed from in-person to distance learning, this question prompted researchers to wonder if distance learning changed the expectations for how teachers are to be present for their students. In this study, researchers examine the Vygotskian idea that teachers are central to the creation of the classroom learning experience. Here, researchers consider how this relates to the rural experience in which there is a strong sense of community (Lyson, 2002; Sherwood, 2001; Tieken, 2014; Zuckerman, 2020) as it clashes with the physical distance that distance learning creates.

Distance Learning

Distance learning existed prior to the pandemic, and there is much research surrounding the idea of learning remotely via technology. Even in pre-pandemic times, many were optimistic about the potential of online learning (Hobbs, 2004). However, despite the availability of online learning, educators have expressed mixed feelings (Irvin et al., 2009; Kormos & Wisdom, 2021; Marietta & Marietta, 2021; Mills et al., 2009; Zuo et al., 2020). Distance learning, specifically for rural districts, has been lauded by some for being able to bridge the distance gap for rural areas, helping students who may not have physical access to specific educational opportunities to better participate (Irvin et al., 2009; Kormos & Wisdom, 2021; Marietta & Marietta, 2021; Zuo et al., 2020). However, it has also been noted that there is a disconnect between the educators presenting information in courses and students taking the courses (Irvin et al., 2009). In many rural

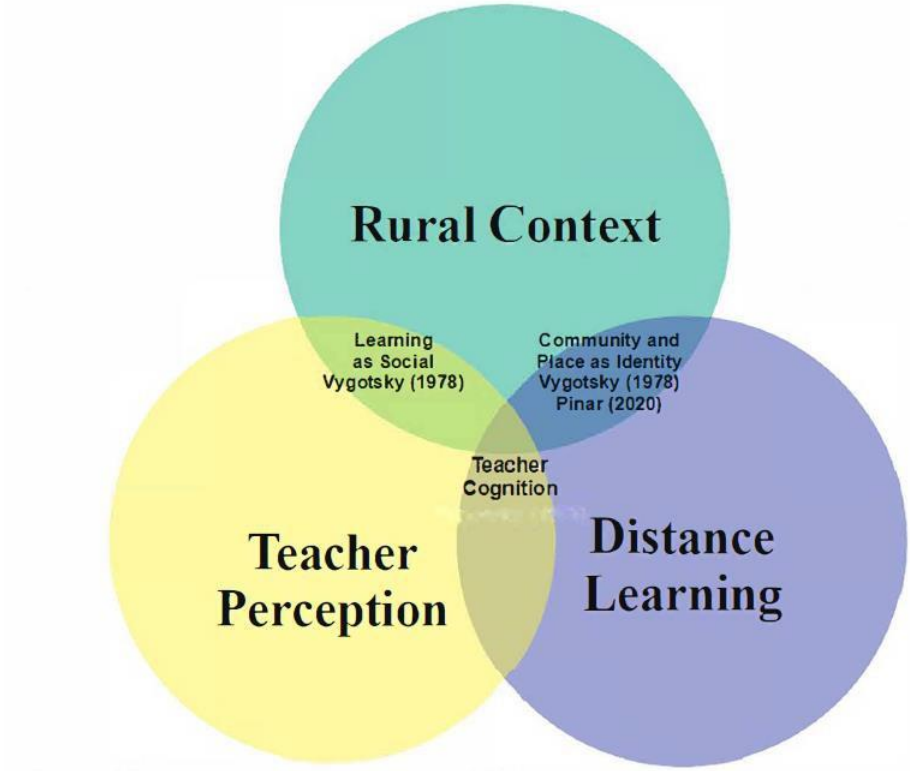
areas, the struggle for quality internet connection remains a hindrance as well (Boerngen & Rickard, 2021; Hobbs, 2004; Kormos & Wisdom, 2021; Marietta & Marietta, 2021; Weiss & Reville, 2019).

Intersection

The intersection of the rural context, Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, and distance learning frames this study (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

Intersection of Rurality, Sociocultural Theory, and Distance Learning



Methodology

Context

The study was conducted at two school sites, Small Town Elementary, grades 3–5, and Country Lane Elementary, grades Pre-K–2, (both names are pseudonyms). Both schools are located in a rural school district that receives several federal grants, including funding for Title I services (serving low-income students) and Title VI services (serving Native students). The entire district serves approximately 17,000 students in grades Pre-K–12th grade across a large rural area, which stretches to include two towns and the surrounding homes and covers more than 200 square miles. The district approached distance learning in a unique style in an attempt to maintain an in-person learning option

for students, keenly aware that many parents leaned heavily on the school and that many students needed to attend school in-person for specific educational purposes and to receive breakfast and lunch. To accommodate these community needs, families were allowed to choose if they wanted their students to attend in person or virtually for the entire semester. Additionally, the district issued a letter from the superintendent every Friday, enumerating the number of COVID-19 cases in the school and issuing a color to indicate the severity of COVID-19 spread in the community. On “green weeks,” families of students attending in person were encouraged and expected to send their children to in-person learning barring any household illness. On “orange weeks,” parents of students attending in person were encouraged to keep their children home to learn virtually if they had the means to do so. On “red weeks,” the district strongly suggested any family with the capability to learn virtually to do so, though this was not a requirement. School remained open for students who attended in person regardless of the color status. Using this method, the district aimed to slow the spread of COVID-19 by minimizing the numbers of students attending in-person classes while allowing the school to remain open. For teachers, however, this meant that each week, their in-person classrooms and distance learning classrooms looked different. With each report, teachers could expect that some students may be learning virtually for the week while others would remain in person. For the entire year, teachers in this district taught a full curriculum to in-person students and distance learning students simultaneously, and the roster for in-person and distance learning students changed weekly. Additionally, students who began the week in-person but were absent mid-week added to the everchanging in-person and distance learning groupings.

Participants

Participants were recruited from the two elementary schools in one rural school district via email. As the district has only one school per age group (i.e., Pre-K–2 and 3–5), participants were recruited from the younger elementary grades from one school and the older elementary grades in the other elementary school. The lead researcher emailed the principals of both elementary schools, who disseminated the emails to all staff. The email explained the purpose of the research and requested participants volunteer their time. Three teachers volunteered to participate in the interviews. Gina, the virtual preschool and kindergarten teacher, and Stacey, a third-grade teacher, taught all content areas to self-contained classrooms. The fifth-grade teacher, Melissa, provided math instruction to multiple sections. Upon agreeing to volunteer, each of the teachers signed a consent form detailing their agreement to participate in Zoom interviews and releasing the information obtained from the interviews to be used in this research study. Participants were not compensated in any way for the study. Each of the three teachers were given pseudonyms to ensure anonymity. All three teachers are female, and one of the three teachers interviewed has lived in the rural town in which they teach for their entire life. The remaining two teachers have lived in the area and have taught at the school for 10

and 15 years respectively. All three are active in the community. It is also important to note that each of the teachers were familiar with technology use, though each had varying degrees of active use in the classroom. One teacher, Melissa, had previously practiced a flipped classroom as part of her in-person teaching. Both Stacey and Gina were familiar with technology and had used it on occasion but were not reliant on the daily use of technology during their in-person teaching.

Methods

This study is qualitative in nature and consists of semi-structured interviews with three teachers followed by a qualitative thematic analysis of the data collected through the interview process. The interviewers reviewed the questions from the NNSTOY survey *Teacher Perspectives on Factors Influencing Effectiveness* (Behrstock-Sherratt et al., 2014) and adapted several of the questions to fit this study. Questions asked included questions about the challenges and supports for teachers as they adapted to distance learning from in-person teaching, their perceptions on how effective distance learning was, and the expectations they felt as educators during distance learning (see Appendix A). The questions were developed to elicit information from the participants that could provide detailed explanations about perceived and explicit expectations when teaching online. Researchers conducted Zoom interviews with the three rural elementary teachers, following up with two of those teachers, to discuss the expectations of rural elementary school teachers during distance learning. Zoom interviews were recorded with the automated transcription feature. After the interviews, researchers listened to the interviews and reviewed the recorded transcription simultaneously, correcting any errors, to ensure the accuracy of the transcriptions. In order to maintain trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), the researchers requested the anonymous participants (dependability) review transcribed interview data (confirmability) to ensure their data was correct (credibility).

Data Analysis

The researchers analyzed the data collected through a thematic analysis using a method described by Bloomberg and Volpe (2008). During a thematic analysis, the researchers examine the data to identify themes that emerge. The researchers worked together to read and review the data collected from the transcribed interviews. This step in the analysis process allowed the researchers to get a sense of the data as a whole. The researchers coded the data and developed categories. During the last phase of the analysis, the researchers combined, collapsed, and/or eliminated codes (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008). Additionally, the three researchers worked together to analyze the data having discussions regarding each piece of data and determining codes and categories. Through the structured data analysis, the researchers were able to identify three themes: Online Teaching, Administrators' Expectations, and Communication (see Table 1). Under each of these three themes, specific subthemes also emerged. The first theme, Online

Teaching, included subthemes of teacher perceptions of online learning, teachers going above and beyond requirements, the challenges and supports of online instruction, and the challenges and supports of responsive teaching. The second theme of Administration's Expectations included subthemes of the challenges and supports of required educational technology. The third theme of Communication included the subthemes of supports and challenges in communication with both parents and students.

Table 1

Major Themes and Subthemes of a Thematic Analysis of Semi-Structured Interviews with Rural Elementary Teachers about Teaching during Distance Learning

Online Teaching	Administrators' Expectations	Communication
• Teachers' Perceptions of Online Learning • Teachers Going Above and Beyond • The Challenges of Online Teaching • The Supports of Online Teaching • The Challenges of Responsive Teaching • The Supports of Responsive Teaching	• The Challenges of Required Educational Technology • The Supports of Required Educational Technology	• The Challenges of Communication with Parents • The Supports of Communication with Parents • The Challenges of Communication with Students • The Supports of Communication with Students

Findings

Online Teaching

Teachers' Perceptions of Online Teaching Compared to In-Person Teaching

In the interviews, the researchers asked the teachers to compare their experiences with teaching online and in-person. The responses presented a clear preference for in-person teaching over teaching online. Much of the discussion centered around the idea that teachers felt they were not actually teaching initially, a notion that can be connected to the sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978) and place theory (Pinar, 2015) as the teachers felt as if their context had shifted from one of social learning, particularly important to the rural community, to one of independent assignment completion. The teachers made clear that "learning is social," as was clearly articulated by participant Stacey. They did not view distance learning as learning but rather as task completion. Gina explained the disconnect: "I put out the information on a regular basis that I'm, you know, doing the same lessons that they would be doing in-person but not necessarily that I'm teaching them."

The shift in expectation of what teaching is proved trying for teachers, particularly in the sense of shifting away from the rural concept of community. In two of the three interviews, teachers broke down in tears as they detailed the struggle from switching to online from in person. Gina was especially vocal in her struggle: "I really hated it at the beginning. I loathed it, I cried. I did not like it. I was like this . . . I'm not teaching them. I really did not like it, and it just . . . I missed the kids being in the room." As she detailed her experience with teaching online as opposed to teaching in person, she explained that while her experience did improve over time, she never felt the connection to her students when teaching online in the way that she felt connected when teaching in person. She found it particularly difficult to not be in the same physical space as her students when they were experiencing the magic of learning, stating "[I] figured out ways to do things that I love to do in the classroom. It wasn't the same, but you know . . . and I didn't see [their] reactions." While the teacher who worked with older students in one specific content subject did seem to have an easier time connecting to her students, the overall message of the teachers was clear: "If I had the choice of being in the classroom or doing it virtually, I would much rather be in the classroom."

Teachers Going Above and Beyond

As there were no clear guidelines when distance learning began and as the administration was careful in not expecting extensive requirements, teachers were largely left to define their role as a distance learning teacher for themselves. Researchers found that all three teachers consistently discussed surpassing expectations of administration, colleagues, and parents, frequently without even being aware that they were discussing remarkable feats, displaying a continued dedication to their community, even amid

pandemic living. Their dedication to their students was evident as each teacher detailed stories of how they worked to ensure students received the best educational experience they could provide, ironically often lamenting that they felt they were not doing enough to support students.

All three teachers discussed utilizing videos to teach, all of which the teachers created themselves. While posting videos created uniquely for students was not a requirement imposed by administration, it seemed a common practice among the educators. Teachers interviewed were especially cognizant of the students who were distance learning for the week, considering how they as instructors could best incorporate at-home learners into classroom learning. Melissa noted that recording herself teaching became common practice: “I have my video up, and whatever I’m teaching I’m recording.” Gina explained that she recorded audio directions and incorporated them into virtual worksheets to ensure parents and students understood how to complete the work. Many teachers also had YouTube channels specifically to support students and parents.

Gina, who taught only virtual students, worked diligently to ensure that her virtual students were able to participate in some of the more hands-on experiences of the classroom. For example, she observed, “We always hatched butterflies at the end of the year. So, we get the little caterpillars in the net and everything. And so, I would do a video each morning of the net with the caterpillars so they could kind of see it, and then I would send it. And I created an online journal for them to draw pictures on there.” The teachers proved their creativity as they told story after story detailing ways they incorporated special events into learning for distance learning students, such as grab-and-go craft events, outdoor social hours, a socially distanced egg drop event, and even social Zoom hours. None of the previously mentioned activities were required or expected by the administration. These were instances of teachers exceeding expectations in order to provide what they perceived to be the best educational opportunity for students and to ensure students continued to feel connected to their classroom community.

The Challenges of Online Teaching

Teaching online in a rural setting has many challenges in its own right (Kormos & Wisdom, 2021), including slow or spotty internet, low bandwidth, or a complete lack of internet connectivity in some rural places (Boerngen & Rickard, 2021; Hobbs, 2004; Kormos & Wisdom, 2021; Marietta & Marietta, 2021; Weiss & Reville, 2019). The area in which the study was conducted proved no exception. The challenges of online teaching proved numerous but not insurmountable. Teachers expressed the initial struggle to be the most arduous. Again, the perceived value of teaching in a physical classroom seemed to inhibit the ways in which teachers were able to transfer their practice and pedagogy to the online space. While the district did offer training on how to use Google Classroom, much of the ideas came from the staff simply sharing new ways with one another on how to teach online. Gina noted, “I felt like it wasn’t, I wasn’t really teaching, and so it took a

little while and took a lot of research [to] [*sic*] me trying to figure out ways that I could do it. But once I figured that out, it was much better." Though that same teacher ended her commentary with an emphatic message: "I still would not do it again if somebody asked me to." Stacey noted that "It took [me] probably, I would say three to four months to really get in a groove and figure out [like] what I wanted my classroom to look like."

Further, the teachers expressed a general sense of feeling overwhelmed despite the many supports detailed below. One noted, "I've seen the pressure on a lot of teachers. I saw it in our building sometimes where people were just like, 'I can't.' It's the pressure the person puts on themselves. I think that's probably the main thing that I've seen." Stacey specifically addressed these feelings of inadequacy, saying "I feel like I could have done more . . . I was very overwhelmed." While the sense of teacher dedication to their students is not rural specific, the rural context certainly plays a role as the teachers feel a responsibility not just as educators but as community members.

Melissa, the teacher who seemed to have the easiest time transitioning, already had an established Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge (TPACK) framework (Mishra & Koehler, 2007) from her previous flipped classroom pedagogy. Thus, she did not struggle in the same way with the "change in milieu" (Wertsch, 1995), nor did her perception of the sociocultural order (Vygotsky, 1978) need to be addressed as it did in the experiences of other teachers. Both the commentary of teachers stating that time and experience made the transition easier along with the fact that the teacher with higher technological experiences had a more positive outlook suggest that additional educational technology training and experience could potentially support teachers with distance learning.

The Supports of Online Teaching

Each of the teachers interviewed sang the praises of their building level and district level administration, acknowledging that the administration did their best in the circumstances of COVID-19 and expressing their gratitude that the administration demonstrated understanding and support as teachers attempted to navigate new teaching practices. It should be noted that many of the teachers saw the administrators as both a friend and colleague, and many of the teachers are, in fact, related to administration, which is not an infrequent occurrence in rural districts. Stacey had a particularly collaborative grade-level team, and she spent much of her commentary explaining that any success proved to be largely due to the level of trust, equity of work output, and general sense of camaraderie in her grade-level team. When attempting to summarize her team, she said simply, "we trust [each other] to make great plans." Further, both Stacey and Melissa indicated that while there was no pressing expectation to try out every great idea that a colleague tried, most of the faculty were eager to share ideas with one another, supporting each other in trying new strategies or in using new software in

online and hybrid learning. They voiced that their environment was extremely supportive at a building level.

While Gina did not voice the same level of collaboration in her building level, she did mention instances of collaboration among grade levels and explicitly expressed that the administration was extremely supportive both in general and when she needed specific support with struggling students. Overall, Stacey seemed to have the most positive experience due to her continued collaborative relationship with her team. While Melissa and Gina also felt supported by administration, it was Stacey's community-based teaching that she continually referred to as the most effective support during distance learning.

The Challenges of Responsive Teaching

The struggle to be able to mediate student learning was a common theme. All three teachers indicated that mediating learning proved difficult. Gina expressed that in order to support students she worked "24/7," acknowledging that in order to help them when they needed support, she was working when students worked. Melissa expressed similar sentiments, usually responding to student struggles with a personalized video. Stacey also explained that students all worked at different times of day, depending on parent schedules, so she felt as if she always had to be available to support students at the time they needed her. She recollected, "whenever we were all distance learning. I'm crazy. I would sit at the computer and just wait, you know. I would wait, and things would be turned in, and I'd be like, Oh! You didn't do this right, and I'd send it right back to them in hopes that maybe they would see it, you know." Her desire to support her students was evident as she explained numerous instances of mediating student learning, teaching parents so that parents could teach their children, and working to ensure students understood assignments.

Addressing the challenges of responsive teaching during distance learning produced some of the most heartbreaking moments of the interviews. In addition to the unrealistic work schedule in which teachers were working around the clock—"I've had messages from parents at 10 o'clock at night"—each of the teachers addressed the same concern: "I'm not reaching all the kids." Even as Stacey talked about responding to individual students as they worked, she did lament that little differentiation was provided to students, finally stating, "you just can't do it all." Teachers explained that mediating in-person learning proved different from mediating online learning due to the factors that accompany rural living, such as the difficulty faced by working parents trying to teach their children in the evenings, spotty internet, and children without internet who had to work on schoolwork outside of their homes. The physical distance left teachers unable to respond to students quickly or at all if students did not participate in learning.

The Supports of Responsive Teaching

Gina's tearful story of working to support a failing student proved emotional as she detailed the experience of working desperately to find any way to support the struggling student: "I've cried about this because I don't know what to do to help her." The story of support was heartwarming, however, as she elaborated on her heartbreaking discussion with administration, who assured Gina that she was absolutely doing her best, and comforted her as she cried, not for the first time, over her own perceived failure of not reaching this student. "She [the administrator] said, "so that's not on you." She said, "you've done everything you can." Even as the administration proved supportive in the instances of teachers trying to mediate student learning, responsive teaching in general proved to have its own set of challenges and supports.

Administration's Expectations

The beginning of distance learning proved a learning experience for everyone, including administration. All three teachers discussed administrative expectations of teachers casually, noting that the real expectation was that teachers are "making sure [they're] doing everything [they] can to continue the learning." Melissa noted that while administrators would express admiration for a specific teacher's approach, "there's nothing specifically that I can think of that they sent out and said every teacher needs to be doing this." All teachers agreed the messaging from administration was clear: "they (the school) were all like saying, you know, do what you can." Stacey did note that when there were specific expectations or suggestions, those were emailed to teachers initially, "because we were trying to get our sea legs under us, that [expectations and information] was just communicated in staff meetings, emails, you know as issues came up, you know that we, you know, didn't plan for. She would communicate those things out." While there were no initial expectations laid out, some basic policies did emerge as distance learning continued. These expectations were minimal. Teachers should have regular office hours. Teachers were also required to have at least two faculty or staff present in any Zoom call with students. Additionally, the expectations centered around required educational technology and timely communication with parents and teachers.

A faculty Google Classroom page was later set up so that teachers in that building could access resources as needed. It included "everything she [the building principal] expected in writing." All three teachers acknowledged that the uniqueness of distance learning during a pandemic meant that complete plans were not prepared ahead of time, and there was a general sense of understanding that plans evolved as needed. The overwhelmingly positive relationship between the administration and teachers was likely influenced by both the friendships and familial ties mentioned previously.

The Challenges of Required Educational Technology

There were specific expectations that teachers use the required educational technology although even those requirements were minimal. Gina noted, “The district wants us to use Kami;” “they want us to use Clever;” “They expect us to use Google [Classroom], for sure.” Even with these requirements, there appeared to be leeway in every respect with one exception, Google Classroom. Again, Gina stated, “I mean we became a Google school last year so that is a definite must.” Teachers all mentioned the required educational technology with general positivity.

In discussing the required educational technology, Gina mentioned that “I find myself answering, you know, going to rooms and answering lots of questions about Google because the teachers still just aren’t familiar with it.” Though she did not receive additional pay, she found herself as the default technology support person. She expressed that some older teachers struggled with the technology, causing some frustration among the older faculty. Gina explained that while the district provided basic Google Classroom training, it was insufficient for the teachers who were not as familiar with technology. Further, that training focused on setting up and using the Google Classroom rather than on any technologically based pedagogy or online content teaching strategies. All three teachers voiced the struggle of finding a rhythm in the use of the required educational technology.

Additionally, all three teachers noted that even as hotspots were available for students, not all families chose to fill out the paperwork to receive them. Gina speculated, “It’s almost like they didn’t want to, and I don’t know why.” Regardless of the reason, several families continued to struggle with the internet, having to drive to relatives’ houses who had Wi-Fi to complete assignments.

The Supports of Required Educational Technology

In the year prior to the pandemic, the district had passed a bond for one-to-one technology, ensuring each student had access to either a tablet or a Chromebook. This proved essential in the success of distance learning as many families would be without the necessary technology for students to learn at home. Further, the district utilized a large portion of their Title I funding to purchase hotspots that could be given to students on free and reduced lunches, which was a large portion of the district. At a district level, the administration, with the support of the community who voted to pass the bond, ensured that every family had access to not only a tablet or Chromebook for each child but also a hotspot. This reciprocal support between the community members and the district paints the picture of support in this specific rural area.

The teachers repeatedly expressed the support they received from administration proved that the administration understood the challenges inherent in the sudden switch teachers were making. Melissa stated, “If someone didn’t do it [a suggested method for

online learning], I don't think there would be any consequence." In fact, all three teachers expressed a feeling of trust between the faculty and administration, acknowledging that administration required consistency in teaching methods employed for online instruction, choosing instead to trust the teachers to teach to the best of their ability in their given situation. Further, the teachers noted repeatedly that a lack of detailed expectations by the administration proved particularly helpful as teachers attempted to navigate the new terrain of distance learning. As Gina noted, "in our building we're not required to have, you know, a Google Meets or a Zoom where they're all in there at one time." It seemed that the lack of specific requirements from the administration regarding how and when to use educational technology proved beneficial as teachers were more easily able to mediate student learning, working with students as students worked, rather than the prescriptive construct of in-person learning hours. Stacey further clarified this further: "you don't have to be working for all the time from eight to three."

Communication

As distance learning meant that students were working from home, communication emerged as a theme between the teacher and administration, the teacher and students, and the teacher and parents. As much of the discussion has already been dedicated to the expectations communicated between the teachers and administration, the researchers focused on the latter two subthemes.

In discussing the expectation of communication, all three teachers agreed with Melissa's statement that "the expectation [from administration] has definitely been keeping in contact with your parents and kids." In nearly every aspect of the discussion, the teachers interviewed expressed how or what they were communicating to students and parents and what type of communication they received back.

The Challenges of Communicating with Students

As noted in previous sections, all three teachers noted the challenge of needing to be available around the clock to support student learning. As students worked when they were able, frequently in the evenings due to parent work schedules or even on specific days and times as families drove to a location to use the internet, teachers felt that they had to be prepared to drop what they were doing to respond to student questions immediately. Further, Melissa noted that since her students were just learning to use email as a form of communication, there was a struggle for students to be able to effectively use email to communicate questions. Gina, the teacher of the youngest students, acknowledged that her primary communication was between her and the parent, leaving her feeling as if she were not the teacher of the students in her classroom.

The Supports of Communicating with Students

As noted in the *Supports of Responsive Teaching* subtheme, teachers worked one-on-one with students to provide support via email, recorded videos, and written

feedback on specific assignments. Students could also reach teachers daily via Google Meet. Stacey detailed how this worked: “If we knew a student needed, you know, help, we have office hours.” These office hours even included one-on-one lessons, which Gina further described. For example, “Let’s have a Google Meets, and you know I can do a beginning sounds lesson.” Further, all three teachers noted that their policies were full of flexibility and grace. Stacey explained, “As far as the student learning at home—so we’ve been—we’ve really tried to offer as much grace as possible.”

The Challenges of Communicating with Parents

Communication between the parent and teacher proved to be a necessary component of distance learning. All three teachers noted that they communicated with parents often, even daily in some instances. While each teacher had their own method for organizing regularly scheduled parent communications, each teacher commented on the frequent texts, emails, and phone calls exchanged between parents and teachers. Communication to parents about what the teacher believed education should look like proved to be problematic. As parents became the de facto teachers of the household, the classroom teacher attempted to communicate not only what the lesson was to be covered but also how she believed it should be taught. Gina expressed her frustration: “Over the course of time I found that there are some students’ parents that thought they were writing it [student work] for them because they were hand over hand holding the child’s hand—writing it for them, which is not what we do in the classroom.” While Gina felt there was a strong pedagogical reason for the expectation of how to teach specific skills, she found that parents did not always understand the pedagogy of education. She noted, “The biggest thing that I have found doing this is parents don’t truly understand how much I expect my students to do.” Further, all three teachers expressed that parents seemed to struggle to understand what their children were capable of, often providing too much help for students. Teachers expressed, “They [students] know how to do it, and there are times when we’ve had a virtual day when [*sic*] parent will text me and say, ‘I don't know how to get on Google Classroom.’ And I just simply say, ‘Just give the tablet to your child. They know what to do,’ and I think that they think that their kids can’t do it. And, I think they can do more than they [think they] can.”

Even as teachers were teaching students in-person and online, they found themselves often teaching the parents as well. Gina, in particular, found this to be the case most often as her students were youngest and in need of the most parental support. She noted, “It’s almost like I have double the students because I have to teach the parents how to use it, so that they can show the kids what to do.” Further, Gina explained that she found herself having to justify why she was teaching certain skills to students when parents believed the skill or strategy to be unnecessary. So, not only did she feel she had double the students, but she also found herself regularly defending her practice and pedagogy. Even as her expertise as an educator was questioned, parents expected that

she remained the teacher, the one in charge of learning. She stated, “They [parents] don’t know what to do and then they feel like, well, it’s your job to make this happen.”

The Supports of Communicating with Parents

Even as the teacher–parent communication proved difficult at times, teachers worked to ensure that parents had all the information they needed to be able to successfully support their children in distance learning. All three teachers talked about using videos to explain everything from educational technology to personalized lesson plans. Two of the three teachers created their own YouTube channels to publish “how to” videos for parents and students. Gina explained that she would “push that [how to videos] out to parents, so that they could, you know, kind of navigate the programs a little bit better.”

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to share the rural teachers’ experiences during emergency distance learning, specifically noting the expectations teachers felt were required along with the supports and challenges of these experiences.

Expectations of Teachers

As the researchers asked rural teachers to consider what expectations they had of themselves or what expectations they perceived from administration during distance learning, ideas of teacher cognition (Golombek & Doran, 2014) and perception became evident. Without clearly delineated rules and expectations during a time of pandemic teaching, all expectations teachers discussed were perceived expectations. Thus, teachers were asked to cognitively consider the perceived expectations and their implications. Any emotional response can also be attributed to Vygotsky, as DiPardo and Potter (2003) explain that cognition and emotion are intimately connected in his sociocultural theory. While teachers demonstrated moving emotional reactions in the interviews and expressed their gratitude to administration for their support for the emotional tolls of teaching during distance learning, the full extent of emotions during distance learning was not examined in this particular research. What is noted is how the relationship and culture of the rural schools affected how teachers perceived this time of teaching. Any perceptions the participants had of expectations during distance learning would be directly influenced by not only their overall perception of their role as a teacher but also by any community-held beliefs about the teacher’s role in education.

Challenges for Teachers in Meeting Expectations

As the study examines the intersection of distance learning, rural context, and teachers’ perceptions, researchers must consider the relevance of the impact of the community’s views of technology in education, the community’s views about education in the home, and the community’s views of parents’ roles in education. These particular

community views may not necessarily be shared by the individual teachers, but the teachers must acknowledge there are "intimate links between school and community" (Sherwood, 2001, p. 2). Furthermore, the teachers are no doubt aware of popular views held by the community since they live and work in the community. In fact, one participant mentioned hearing parents discuss their views on distance learning on multiple occasions as she worked her second job in the community. Thus, teachers were left affected by community views on distance learning, either because they shared similar views or because they felt at odds with community members.

It is worth noting that Johnson (2009) details that teacher mediation of student academics necessitates that "teachers not only need to understand the task or concept from the perspective of an expert but they must also understand where the student is—in other words, what it is like not to fully understand the task or concept—and then be skilled at providing strategic mediation that enables students to move toward expertise or automaticity" (p. 20). It was this frustration of not being "present" with the students to address struggles immediately that the teachers found frustrating. The feeling that they were not really teaching, but that they were instead issuing assignments to be completed, seemed to be at the head of these challenges. Pinar (2015) warns against the overuse of technology and the harm that overuse can bring to the culture, history, and community of a place, "as place becomes nowhere in particular, cyberspace" (p. 46). Dissolving the physical barriers of place can be especially troublesome for rural communities whose identity is often embedded in those specific boundaries.

The researchers found that there was an intimate link between the community and teacher identity of those in the rural community and the way the teachers perceived their roles in distance learning. Ultimately, the teachers of rural community's view learning and teaching as a social activity that was challenged during distance learning despite the extensive support of the community and administration. Teachers felt, overwhelmingly so, that distance learning did not allow them to truly teach and that true learning happened best in an in-person setting.

Supports for Teachers in Meeting Expectations

Even as the closeness of the rural community posed challenges, it also proved to be the primary support for the participants. All three teachers discussed the value of feeling supported by colleagues, administration, or parents in their interviews. Teachers felt that a supportive attitude, trust in their ability to teach, and collaboration among colleagues were the most helpful supports during online teaching. Similarly, all three teachers expressed that without the support of the close-knit community, they would have not been able to make it through emergency pandemic teaching.

Conclusion

Teachers interviewed clearly felt a strong connection to their community. That connection, common in rural communities (Coladarci, 2007), affected the way in which the participants viewed teaching and learning. All participants privileged the social aspect of learning and therefore perceived the physical distance aspect of online learning as a negative part of the experience. Further, because the teachers interviewed felt a strong sense of responsibility to their rural community, they also perceived their own failure to meet the expectations they had of themselves as a particularly difficult aspect of online learning. While they reported going above and beyond administrative and parental expectations, it was the expectations they had of themselves that posed the biggest challenge. Supportive administrative attitudes reported by the teachers mitigated some of this challenge. However, rural administrators and teacher preparation programs can consider the implications for supporting educators with self-imposed expectations in future online learning programs as curriculum is crafted for teacher training and professional development.

While the participants reported a supportive administration and collaborative environment at the building level, specific aspects of distance learning proved difficult for all three teachers: the nontraditional work hours of online learning, asynchronous mediation of student learning, and student and teacher access to the internet. Even as the district attempted to support the community with one-to-one laptops and hotspots for those in need, connectivity issues continued to be a challenge for some.

While the administrative expectations of teachers were minimal, there were basic expectations that specific educational technology was used. There were mixed messages from teachers as teachers both noted the policies positively and yet lamented the insufficient training provided. While the teachers perceived the lack of mandates as administrative trust in their ability to teach online, it also left the teachers feeling as if they were failing even as they surpassed expectations. While the grade level that the teachers taught affected what expectations they felt they were not meeting, each teacher bemoaned the fact that she could not better support her students, parents, and ultimately the rural community. It is the intimate connection between the teachers and the rural community that this research offers as a unique contribution to the existing research on distance learning.

Limitations

Although the small number of participants in this study allowed for lengthier interviews, ranging from 65–90 minutes, and for follow up interviews and clarifications that yielded data rich in detail, the study is limited to only three teachers in one rural district. These experiences and perspectives may not match that of all rural elementary school teachers during the COVID-19 distance learning experience. Further, additional limitations are present in the unique way the district approached distance learning.

Because teachers were expected to teach both in person and online simultaneously with an ever-changing student population of in-person students and online students (see "Context" for a complete description), the negative experiences and challenges associated with distance learning were likely affected by having to teach both online and in person at the same time. However, the purpose of this study was not to identify sweeping generalizations of the rural elementary education teacher's experience as rural educators' experiences are all unique.

Implications

Even with the limitation of the number of participants, the findings provide information to rural administrators and to teacher preparation programs as to the types of experiences rural elementary education teachers had during emergency online learning, and that information can support administrators and teacher preparation programs in mitigating potential challenges for rural elementary educators teaching online in the future. As education pushes forward with the likelihood of continued and increasing online learning, the implications for rural teachers prove significant: a sociocultural approach in which teachers can remain connected to their community is of particular importance in a rural school.

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About Authors

Chelsey Walters, M.Ed., is an adjunct professor at Tulsa Community College in Tulsa, Oklahoma and a doctoral student of Curriculum Studies at Oklahoma State University. She has her bachelor's degree in Elementary Education and Spanish Language from the University of Colorado at Boulder and her master's degree in Reading Education from Northeastern State University at Broken Arrow, Oklahoma. She is a scholar of reading education, English language, and language arts curriculum with research interests in rural literacy education, rural K-12 education, and rural communities. mrs.chelseywalters@gmail.com

Alesha Baker, Ph.D., is an associate professor in the Educational Leadership Department and the Chair for the Library Media and Information Technology program at Northeastern State University. She earned her Ph.D. in Educational Technology from Oklahoma State University. Dr. Baker has 13 years of experience in PK-12 with the last three of those years serving as an elementary school librarian. Dr. Baker has published multiple peer- reviewed book chapters and research articles on topics related to technology integration in the classroom and school library, the school librarian's role in resource curation, open educational resource use in higher education and global PK-12 settings, social media use for teacher professional development, and teacher professional development

effectiveness. She has presented at numerous local, state, national, and international conferences sharing her research and findings with other educators. bakera@nsuok.edu

Michele Shell, M.S., works at Northeastern State University as the Graduate College Coordinator, Recruitment & Engagement. She has her bachelor's degree in University Studies from Oklahoma State University and her master's degree in Library Media and information Technology from Northeastern State University. michele.shell@cox.net

Appendix A

Interview Questions

General Questions

1. What was your teaching background prior to distance learning?

Support/Challenges

2. What technological or digital components were part of the teaching experience prior to the implementation of distance learning? If any, how have those components contributed to the transition to distance learning?
3. How are you collaborating with other teachers during distance learning? How has the collaboration benefitted all involved?
4. Which lessons were most challenging to translate from in-person learning into distance learning? Why?
5. Which lessons or standards were easiest to translate from in-person learning into distance learning? Why?
6. What successes have you experienced during your distance learning classes?
    a. Students who were previously on-level or below level are working ahead to exceed academic standards for their grade level?
    b. Students who were previously below level are catching up to grade-level material?
    c. Students are pursuing individual educational interests?
    d. Students are able to get one-on-one instruction?
    e. Students are cultivating new and productive relationships with their peers?
    f. Other?

Rural Setting

7. What effects, if any, do you feel the rural setting of the district has played in the successes or struggles of distance learning?
8. What significant differences do you perceive between distance education and on-campus education classes **concerning student success**?
    a. Do you believe any of these differences are exacerbated by the rural setting? If so, which differences and why?
9. What significant differences do you perceive between distance education and on-campus education classes **concerning teacher satisfaction**?
    a. Do you believe any of these differences are exacerbated by the rural setting? If so, which differences and why?

10. Which barriers are you experiencing during your distance-taught classes **that you believe are caused by the rural setting of the district**?
    a. Internet outages/Data caps/Slow internet?
    b. Students who do not have internet or hotspots?
    c. Students who do not have an appropriate device (laptop or tablet necessary)?
    d. Students who have broken school devices?
    e. Working parents without time to support students?
    f. Parents/caregivers unfamiliar with technology are unable to assist students?
    g. Students not completing work?
    h. Illness (COVID or other) has caused a disruption in learning?
    i. General technical support issues?
    j. Other?

Expectations

11. What expectations do you feel that the administration has of you during distance learning? How are those expectations different from in-person learning?
12. What expectations do you feel parents and students have of you during distance learning? How are those expectations different from in-person learning?
13. What significant differences **in expectations** do you perceive between distance education and on-campus education classes?
14. What are your perceived expectations regarding distance learning for the following:
    a. Lesson plans
    b. Time spent meeting (over the phone or via Zoom) with parents
    c. Time spent meeting (over the phone or via Zoom) with students
    d. Feedback on distance learning assignments
    e. Software/platforms to use for distance learning
    f. Differentiation
    g. Equitable learning experiences within your distance learning "classroom"
    h. Horizontal alignment of learning goals and lesson delivery
    i. Vertical alignment of learning goals
15. Where (if anywhere) can you access clearly defined expectations in writing regarding distance learning for the items discussed in the previous question?
    a. If the expectations are not in writing, how have they been communicating to you and your colleagues?
16. How are you expected to measure student success or conduct standards assessment differently during distance learning?

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Disparities Among Cochlear Implant Users: Language, Service Providers, and Locale

Karen Engler, *Missouri State University*

Sonia Arora, *Illinois State University*

Kennedy Rice, *Missouri State University*

Dani Willhite, *Missouri State University*

Allison Baker, *Missouri State University*

Jill Oswalt, *Missouri State University*

This descriptive study aims to delineate the characteristics of select students with cochlear implants in Midwest public school districts and the professionals who received consultation services. Researchers analyzed nine years of archival grant data focused on communication modality, school district locales, and types of service providers. Findings yielded that the largest group of students communicated primarily using gestures and vocalizations followed by students using spoken English. Of the service providers, almost all Deaf educators and interpreters had a communication match with their students. Results also revealed a disproportionate number of students directly served by a deaf educator in city/suburb locales compared to rural/town. These findings suggest some students with cochlear implants may be underserved by deaf educators, especially in rural areas.

***Keywords*: cochlear implants, deaf or hard of hearing, hearing loss, modes of communication, rural education, public schools, language performance**

Due to the implementation of Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) and the emphasis on inclusive educational experiences, the majority of deaf and hard of hearing (DHH) students are in mainstream classrooms. More specifically, approximately 63% of these students spend 80% or more of their time within the mainstream general education classrooms (Gallaudet Research Institute [GRI], 2011; U.S. Department of Education, 2017, 2021) alongside their peers with typical hearing. With the advent of newborn hearing screening, considerable advancement in hearing technology (i.e., hearing aids and cochlear implants), and early intervention, the developmental landscape of deaf education has improved over the last 20 plus years (Mayer et al., 2021). However,

students who are DHH still face educational challenges and often lag behind their peers with typical hearing (Huber & Kipman, 2012; Lund et al., 2022; Trezek et al., 2010; Sarant et al., 2015; Yoshinaga-Itano, 2015). Recent research has indicated that the literacy performance of children with cochlear implant (CI) technology has improved over time. Moreover, at times performance scores are found to be comparable to their hearing peers (Mayer & Trezek, 2018).

A CI is a surgically implanted device that bypasses either damaged or non-functioning parts of the inner ear using an electrode array to stimulate the auditory nerve fibers that are then processed by the brain (Cole & Flexer, 2016; Eshrangi et al., 2012). Simply put, CIs were designed and developed to afford those who were profoundly deaf auditory access to speech frequencies that were not previously accessible by other means of technology such as hearing aids (Cole & Flexer, 2016). While CI technology has influenced positive outcomes, it has also emphasized the heterogenous nature of this diverse group (Archbold & Mayer, 2012). CI technology and its advancements are one piece of the puzzle; factors such as the age of identification, age of amplification, age of intervention, language exposure, locale, and more all directly influence the needs of students who are DHH as well as how they receive such services. The heterogeneous demographics of DHH students can lead to diverse needs and, consequently, diverse and creative methods of service delivery. This begs the question: Are students who are DHH getting the services they need, particularly if they are in rural school districts?

Service delivery complications for students who are DHH in rural school districts have been noted (Belcastro, 2004; National Deaf Center [NDC] on Postsecondary Outcomes, 2017). However, what remains relatively unknown are the nuanced demographics of the students within different locales, including rural school districts. Examination of demographics such as communication modality, service provider types, communication match, among others seeks to better inform current practices for all students who are DHH with CIs. Moreover, emphasis on data collection pertaining to school district locale is necessary as service delivery complications in certain locales are likely impacting efforts to help improve outcomes among those who are DHH.

Conceptual Framework

This study rests on the conceptual framework outlined by what was previously known as the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (P.L. 94-142) and then eventually reauthorized and amended as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004), which purports that children with disabilities have a right to free and *appropriate* education, along with inclusion as mandated by the LRE. While this legislation protects and intends to provide appropriate services to all children with disabilities, the individualized nature and interpretation of this legislation leads to potentially underserving specific populations, such as those who are DHH (Silvestri & Hartman, 2022). Furthermore, the heterogenous nature of students who are DHH adds layers of

complexities to the implementation of IDEA and LRE. Therefore, it is pertinent and timely to examine current practices and characteristics of students who are DHH, particularly those with CIs, to provide the educational services necessary for better outcomes.

Educational Environments

Similar to other hearing assistive technology (i.e., hearing aids), a CI is a tool for auditory access to the brain. Recipients of a CI need intervention to develop auditory pathways, processing and linguistic skills necessary to derive meaning from the input gained through the CI (Cole & Flexer, 2016). An increasing percentage of students who are DHH utilize CI technology (Archbold & Mayer, 2012; GRI, 2011; Mitchell & Karchmer, 2006). Often professionals view the use of CI technology as the solution to challenges faced in the classroom. Furthermore, professionals may be unaware that additional strategies and/or support are often needed in conjunction with the CI device for the student to successfully utilize it both academically and socially (Okalidou, 2010; Jachova & Kovacevic, 2010). Advancements in CI technology along with the knowledge and training associated with it is pertinent, not only for educators of the DHH but for general education teachers, special education teachers, speech-language pathologists, and more.

While the mandate of LRE advocates for the inclusion of students who are DHH into the mainstream setting (U.S. Department of Education, 2017), these young children and students often face a number of challenges compared to their peers with typical hearing. Therefore, thoughtful consideration of the appropriate LRE on an individual basis is necessary to ensure each student's success (Silvestri & Hartman, 2022). Decisions regarding LRE should be made based on student need, not on resources and service provider availability.

Although not all young children and students utilizing CI technology need extensive services to support their learning and education, those who require it should be given access. Due to the specialized training and understanding required, we argue that appropriate services for DHH children often should include a certified educator of the DHH. Educators of the DHH have a unique skill set and knowledge base that is unmatched by any other service provider given the formal education and development of such skills for certification (GAO, 2011; Reynolds et al., 2014). Examination and analysis of current practices in the field are necessary to have an accurate depiction of service delivery for children who are DHH.

Service Delivery for Students Who are DHH

As simple as it sounds, service delivery is not black and white; in fact, there are a number of external factors that can cloud the services DHH students receive. Service delivery complications have been presented throughout the literature for students who are DHH, including those with CIs, such as a lack of time (Antia & Rivera, 2016), a lack

of service providers (Barr et al., 2018; GAO, 2011; Sibon-Macarro et al., 2014), lack of funding available for deaf education programs or other services (Ahern, 2011; GAO, 2011), and distance constraints (Ahern, 2011; Barr et al., 2018; Furno et al., 2020; GAO, 2011; Sibon-Macarro et al., 2014). In particular, the need for certified quality teachers to provide services to students with low-incidence disabilities is arguably a paramount concern among rural school districts (Barr et al., 2018, Jameson et al., 2019; Rude et al., 2005). “Clearly, the historically persistent teacher shortage in the field of special education seriously jeopardized the quality of education provided to students with LI [low-incidence] disabilities, especially those in rural and remote areas” (Jameson et al., 2019, p. 201–202).

Providing appropriate educational experiences and services to students who are DHH presents challenges regarding recruiting and retaining quality educators with appropriate training (GAO 2011; Jameson et al., 2019). Reynolds et al. (2014) suggested that in recent years, a trend has resulted whereby districts, especially districts in rural areas, use special education teachers and speech pathologists rather than a deaf educator as service providers for these students. The barriers of funding and hiring qualified educators to work with students is prominently seen within rural settings since the population of students with hearing loss tends to be small. When school districts are unable to pay for specialized services for students who are DHH, interpreters and educators move on to receive better pay in other districts or in a non-school setting (GAO, 2011). Furthermore, rural districts may need to hire an outside consultant, which requires extensive driving, limiting availability, and can potentially be costly, connecting back to the aforementioned funding constraints (Ahern, 2011; Sibon-Macarro et al., 2014).

Other barriers such as geographical issues and inadequate teacher preparation present a critical need for teachers of the DHH to collaborate and facilitate the necessary skill development for general education teachers who work with their students who are DHH (Furno et al., 2020; NDC on Postsecondary Outcomes, 2017). Specifically, the NDC on Postsecondary Outcomes (2017) emphasized the importance of training educators on the use of technology (e.g., tools for distance learning) in rural areas to help meet the needs of the students who are DHH. The use of technology in distance learning adds potential challenges for equal access among those who are DHH; therefore, this solution may also pose an additional challenge.

Robust research investigating disparities in service delivery and its implications for students who are DHH in rural and remote areas is prudent (Lund et al., 2022), particularly for those who use CIs. This points to an imperative need for more research to better understand and serve this population. To respond to the lack of services and information regarding CI technology as well as the needs of students who are DHH, a Midwest Department of Education (MWDED) and Midwest University (these pseudonyms are used

to maintain confidentiality) collaborated by providing free consultation services to school districts with school-aged students with CIs.

Communication and Language Needs

While the literature surrounding communication and language needs is robust for children who are DHH, there is a persistent "either-or dilemma" regarding communication modality (e.g., manual communication and listening and spoken language) and its impact on language development (Hall, 2017, p. 961). Despite this dilemma, there is consensus among the professionals in the field that access to language and strong language development is arguably a priority for children who are DHH (Hall et al., 2019). There is irrefutable evidence that strong language development and foundation are imperative for consequently strong academic and social-emotional skills (Choi et al., 2020; Cole & Flexer, 2016). Furthermore, the effects of language delays and language deprivation are proven to have negative consequences as well as hindered brain development and language deficits due to the diminished neuroplasticity as children age (Cole & Flexer, 2016; Hall, 2017).

Language deprivation among those who are DHH can stem from a lack of accessible input, which can derive from language models that are not a communication match (Hall et al., 2019). Studies pertaining to language environments are largely focused on parental language models as well as school language environments (Aragon & Yoshinaga-Itano, 2012; Arora et al., 2020; Rufsvold et al., 2018). However, few if any studies have examined communication match among service providers and their students. Language-rich environments, whether school or home, are futile unless that language is accessible, and their conversational partners are fluent in the child's communication modality; in other words, they are a communication match. For this paper, communication match is defined as a communication partner (i.e., service provider) who communicates in the student's preferred communication modality (i.e., spoken language, visual communication such as American Sign Language, etc.) and to the level of fluency that matches the student.

A common thread found in the literature is that early amplification is indicative of improved auditory skills and speech production (Connor et al., 2000; Cupples et al., 2018; Ching, 2015; Ching et al., 2017). Language acquisition and development appear to be consistently linked to age of amplification; other demographics such as communication modality have reported somewhat conflicting results. For instance, studies found that method of communication yielded no significant differences in the development of language among CI users (Connor et al., 2000; Yanbay et al., 2014).

Hyde and Punch (2011) found a minority of parents (15–18%) and teachers (30%) reported using a form of sign language with their children and students. Parents indicated that though they wished for their children to develop spoken language, several still used a form of sign language to support academic development (Hyde & Punch, 2011). While

researchers have expressed that exposure to sign language is not advantageous for the development of spoken language in children with CIs (Geers et al., 2017), more robust research is needed to firmly reach this conclusion; in fact, multiple studies have disputed this claim (Hall, 2017; Fitzpatrick et al., 2016). However, what remains unknown among these studies is whether children with CIs had a communication match with their language models to truly access these language environments in efforts to maximize language development.

Grant Details

Beginning in 2008, a Midwest Department of Education (MWDED) contracted with Midwest University in direct response to a statewide priority need identified by PK–12 schools to better serve students with CIs. A grant was developed with a primary goal to enhance the knowledge and skills of educators, speech language pathologists, and other school district personnel who implement services to students who are deaf who utilized CI technology, resulting in improved achievements of these students.

School districts with one or more students who had at least one CI qualified for the consultation services. Consultation services were district initiated. Through this collaboration, free and primarily indirect CI consultations were available to any school district personnel in the state who requested and continued with the consultation services. Indirect services were provided through consultations via conference calls or virtual meetings with school district personnel and/or administrators. On rare occasions, school district personnel and parents traveled to Midwest University for consultation services and/or direct intervention with the student.

During consultations, notes were taken by the lead author and graduate student worker for this grant. Notes were used for review of consultation discussions, recommendations, and materials shared with district personnel. This facilitated collaborations with districts, specific to the individualized needs of their student(s) with CIs. For research purposes, the archival data of notes and pertinent data sources (i.e., emails) were coded retroactively and de-identified for analysis. The archival data consisted of the first nine years (2008–2017) of the grant.

Significance of the Study

Given the heterogenous nature of achievements among students who are DHH, more information and analysis are needed to discern the areas of focus in regard to improving the educational outcomes of these students. By examining the data, this study can shed light on the realities and potential pitfalls of service delivery to students who use CI technology. In doing so, this study can inform and improve educational practices of educators working with students who are DHH as well as their administrators.

Research Questions

The research questions investigated were:

1. What were the primary modes of communication used by the students with CIs who were served through the grant?
2. What were the school district locales of the students with CIs served through the grant?
3. What were the provider types of the professionals who served the students with CIs during this grant cycle?

Method

Participants

Participants were students with at least one CI whose data was available in an archived database. The participants were selected from the first nine years of archival data collected since the inception of the CI consultation grant. Of the 140 students served through this grant, 72 students were included in this data analysis as participants. Students within the districts were only counted once, during their initial year of consultation. Data included types of school district service providers serving students with CIs as well as data on students with CIs in grades early childhood through high school. Permission to use the de-identified archival data was given by a supervisor in MWDED's Office of Special Education.

Sixty-eight of the potential participants were excluded from the study due to nonexistent student data. In those cases, student data was not available as it was not needed to answer the school district's question(s) or no consultation services were received due to a lack of district follow-up. On occasion, a school district no longer required the consultation services (e.g., a student moved from the district, or the district hired a deaf education consultant for on-site services).

It is important to note that of the 72 students with CIs that received indirect services through the grant, 25 students were served directly by a deaf educator in their district. These 25 students are delineated as a subgroup of this sample as they received direct services from individuals who have the training and specialized certification as deaf educators to work with this population. Direct services are defined as services directly provided to the student to address IEP goals and educational needs.

Data Collection Procedure

IRB permission was obtained through Midwest University. The data collection procedure included three primary phases: (a) category selection, definitions, and coding definition; (b) inter-rater reliability; and (c) coding and data analysis. An initial review of archival data revealed prevalent and relevant categories for exploration. Researchers

determined the final categorical variables and corresponding definitions along with statistician input. Inter-rater reliability procedures influenced refinement of definitions.

Definitions of Categorical Variables

Modes of communication

As researchers coded the data, they selected all modes of communication that applied for each student: (a) spoken English, (b) American Sign Language (ASL), (c) sign language, and (d) gestures and vocalizations. ASL was defined by the use of elicited or spontaneous signs that followed the grammatical and lexical rules of the language, and consequently, sign language was defined by the use of elicited or spontaneous manual communication at least at the word level. The data analyzed on the total of 72 students identified the following four modes of communication categories: (a) gestures and vocalization, (b) spoken English only, (c) spoken English and sign language, and (d) sign language only. Gestures and vocalization did not have an 'only' category because students who primarily used gestures and vocalizations to communicate also, on occasion, used a spoken word(s) or sign(s) so multiple communication modes had been selected. Furthermore, no students were reported to use ASL.

Speech intelligibility

A student's speech intelligibility was determined to be overall intelligible or overall unintelligible when it was specifically stated by a service provider. If there was no explicit documentation of the student's speech intelligibility, it was recorded as unknown.

Language performance

Language performance (e.g., limited language, below, and at grade level) was measured as an explicit self-reported variable by the professional receiving consultation services. A student was declared to have limited language if there was data collected during consultation services that indicated as such. If it was not explicitly stated by the professional, it was recorded as unknown.

Locale

School district locale was coded as rural, town, city, or suburb using the National Center for Education Statistics's (NCES; 2015, 2022) definitions for each category. Specifically, the NCES (2015, 2022) defines rural school districts as a region that range from 5 to 25 miles from an urbanized area and that is located 2.5 to 10 miles from an urban cluster. A town was defined as a region inside an urban cluster that is less than or equal to 10 miles to more than 35 miles from an urbanized area. A suburban district was defined as a region outside a principal city and inside an urbanized area with 100,000 to 250,000 people, and a city was defined as a region inside a principal city and urbanized area with 100,000 to 250,000 or more people. Furthermore, the NCES (2015, 2022) further defines each of these definitions into sub-categories of distant, remote, and fringe

for rural and town or as city or suburb with sub-categories of small, mid-size, and large, based on both the districts' location and their relative distance from a more populated area. For example, rural: fringe or city: small. Initial data analysis indicated the distribution of the participants between subcategories of rural and town were nearly evenly distributed whereas there were twice as many students in city locale compared to suburb locales. The aforementioned locales were combined based on similar attributes being more rural versus more city. Specifically, the categories were labeled: (a) rural/town and (b) city/suburb.

Service provider type

Service providers were identified as professionals within the school districts who had provided services as delineated on the student's individualized education plan (IEP). In this study, data collected focused on the following service provider types: (a) general education teachers, (b) speech language pathologists, (c) special education teachers, (d) deaf education teachers, (e) interpreters, and (f) paraprofessionals.

Communication Match

A communication match was determined if the service provider was considered to be fluent in the child's primary communication mode to communicate. Furthermore, it is considered to be a communication match when the service provider directly communicates with the student, without the use of facilitators (i.e., deaf educator or interpreter).

Inter-Rater Reliability

Inter-rater reliability was established by coding one specific year by five researchers. Data areas coded during this phase were (a) communication modes of the student, (b) school district geographical locales, and (c) service provider types. Due to the number of researchers coding the data, inter-rater reliability was set at the 80% agreeance level or, in other words, requiring 4 of the 5 researchers' agreement in coding (Gersten et al., 2005). In order to achieve 80% agreement, some refinement of definitions and coding was required. Inter-rater reliability indicated over 85% category agreement among the raters in all but two of the variables. The two variables determined to be not in agreement were further addressed. There was an additional variable, mode of communication in sign language, in which 80% agreement was not reached; it fell at 75% agreement. However, the overall mode of communication percentage of agreement was 90%; therefore, the sign language category was considered to be in agreement with the inter-rater reliability.

The two categories that did not reach agreement were whether the student had intelligible speech and whether the student had language performance that was at grade level, below grade level, or limited language. Definition revisions moved from educated deductions based on the data to requiring it to be explicitly stated within the data; in other

words, it was self-reported by the professional receiving consultation services. In addition, a final inter-rater reliability check was completed on the non-agreement variables. Two researchers rated each of the aforementioned variables independently and then shared their results. If there was not agreement by the two raters, then a third rater coded the data without knowledge of the previous rater's decisions and discussed with the others to reach agreement.

Research Design and Data Analysis

The researchers have identified this study and its results as a descriptive study**.** All variables examined in this study are categorical variables as defined previously. The remaining eight years of archival data were divided and independently coded by the researchers based upon the criteria set as a result of the inter-reliability. Given that the dataset consisted of frequencies and categorical variables, analyses was conducted using cross-tabulation. The dataset does not meet the assumptions for robust statistical analyses such as Pearson's chi-squared test (Field, 2018); therefore, descriptive analysis (i.e., frequency tables) was sufficient for this dataset. The integrity of study data compilation was guided by adherence to inter-rater reliability protocol.

Results

Research Question One

What were the primary modes of communication used by the students with CIs who were served through the grant?

The breakdown of modes of communication are displayed in Table 1 for all 72 participants and the subgroup of 25 students who had direct services from a deaf educator. In both groups, more students primarily used gestures and vocalizations (44.4% of all participants and 36% of the subgroup receiving direct services from a deaf educator). The second most prevalent mode of communication was spoken English only at 34.7% and 32%, respectively.

Table 1 also illustrates the grade range at implantation and grade range at consultation measured against primary mode of communication. Across all communication modes, more students were implanted during early intervention (birth to 3 years of age). However, for those students using gestures and vocalizations primarily to communicate, there was a nearly equal distribution between those who were implanted during early intervention (40.6%) and those implanted during early childhood (37.5%); the difference reflected only one participant. Furthermore, a majority of the students primarily using gestures and vocalizations to communicate were in early childhood at the time of consult. Conversely, a majority of the students whose primary mode of communication was spoken English only were in fourth grade through 12th grade at the time of consult. Additionally, this spoken English only group did not share the nearly equal distribution at age of implantation. A majority (52%) of the spoken English only group were implanted

during early intervention followed by a decrease greater than half for participants in the spoken English only group who were implanted during early childhood (24%).

Table 1

Primary Mode of Communication According to Grade Range at Implantation and at Consult

	Primary Mode of Communication							
	Gestures and Vocalizations		Spoken English Only		Spoken English and Sign		Sign Language Only	
	%	*n*	%	*n*	%	*n*	%	*n*
Participants (n=72)	44.4%	32	34.7%	25	16.7%	12	4.2%	3
Participants receiving deaf education services (n=25)	36.0%	9	32.0%	8	28.0%	7	4.0%	1
Grade Range at Implantation (*n* = 72)								
Early Intervention	40.6%	13	52.0%	13	41.7%	5	66.7%	2
Early Childhood	37.5%	12	24.0%	6	8.3%	1	33.3%	1
Kindergarten- 3rd	12.5%	4	4.0%	1	16.7%	2	0%	0
4th- 12th	3.1%	1	8.0%	2	8.3%	1	0%	0
Unknown	6.3%	2	12.0%	3	25.0%	3	0%	0
Total	100%	32	100%	25	100%	12	100%	3
Grade Range at Consult (*n* = 72)								
Early Childhood	53.1%	17	16.0%	4	16.7%	2	0%	0
Kindergarten- 3rd	37.6%	12	32.0%	8	66.7%	8	66.7%	2
4th-12th	9.3%	3	52.0%	13	8.3%	1	33.3%	1
Unknown	0%	0	0%	0	8.3%	1	0%	0
Total	100%	32	100%	25	100%	12	100%	3

Note. The participants receiving deaf education services were the 25 students receiving direct services from a deaf educator at the time of consultation.

Language performance was compared to primary mode of communication in Table 2 for the 25 students who received direct services from a deaf educator and the 47 students without direct services from a deaf educator. Given the extensive training and knowledge base of deaf educators, researchers wanted to display the data with and without this subgroup to highlight the differences in characteristics as it relates to the service professionals. As seen in Table 2, data indicated that of the students served directly by a deaf educator, more students were reported as having limited language performance across all primary modes of communication except for spoken English only. Approximately 87% of students using spoken English only were reported to be performing at grade level for language performance. There were no students using spoken English only and being served by a deaf educator who were at the limited or below grade level language performance. Again, a majority of the students using spoken English were in grades 4-12, at the time of consult.

Additionally, Table 2 presents the group of participants not receiving direct services by a deaf educator. Table 2 shows that 61.7% of all participants were reported as functioning with limited language performance or below grade level. There were no students whose primary mode of communication was spoken English only who fell within the limited language performance category. The only group reported with students functioning at grade level used spoken English only as their mode of communication, a total of seven students. In other words, approximately 15% of the participants, who did not receive direct services from a deaf educator and used spoken English as their mode of communication, were functioning at grade level in regard to their language performance.

Table 2

Language Performance of Participants According to the Participants' Primary Mode of Communication

		Primary Mode of Communication							
		Gestures and Vocalizations		Spoken English Only		Spoken English and Sign		Sign Language Only	
		%	*n*	%	*n*	%	*n*	%	*n*
Participants	Language Performance								
(*n* = 47)	Limited Language Performance	52.2%	12	0%	0	40.0%	2	50.0%	1
	Below Grade Level	34.8%	8	29.4%	5	40.0%	2	50.0%	1
	At Grade Level	0%	0	41.2%	7	0%	0	0%	0
	Unknown	13.0%	3	29.4%	5	20.0%	1	0%	0
	Total	100%	23	100%	17	100%	5	100%	2
		%	*n*	%	*n*	%	*n*	%	*n*
Participants receiving deaf education services	Language Performance								
(*n* = 25)	Limited Language Performance	55.6%	5	0%	0	42.8%	3	100%	1
	Below Grade Level	22.2%	2	0%	0	28.6%	2	0%	0
	At Grade Level	0%	0	87.5%	7	14.3%	1	0%	0
	Unknown	22.2%	2	12.5%	1	14.3%	1	0%	0
	Total	100%	9	100%	8	100%	7	100%	1

Table 3 indicates providers' perception of overall speech intelligibility, as compared with the student's primary mode of communication, for those students utilizing spoken English in some capacity. Less than half of the participants (18.9%) fell within the unknown category because it wasn't explicitly reported by a service provider. Of those students using spoken English alone or in combination with sign language, approximately half (48.7%) were deemed overall intelligible and 32.4% were rated overall unintelligible; the remaining were identified as unknown.

The data indicates a stark contrast between the groups of students who used spoken English only versus those using spoken English and sign language in relation to overall speech intelligibility. Sixty percent (60%) of the spoken English only group was deemed overall intelligible while 40% were either unintelligible or listed as unknown because intelligibility was not explicitly stated in the data. Conversely, 25% of the spoken English and sign language group were reported as overall intelligible with the remaining 75% reported as overall unintelligible. Again, the majority of the students using spoken

English only were in grades 4-12, at the time of consult. The majority of the students using spoken English and sign language were in K-3 grade.

Table 3

Speech Intelligibility of the Participants who use Spoken English in any Capacity

	Mode of Communication					
	Spoken English Only		Spoken English and Sign		Both Groups Combined	
	%	*n*	%	*n*	%	*n*
Speech Intelligibility						
Overall Intelligible	60.0%	15	25.0%	3	48.7%	18
Overall Unintelligible	12.0%	3	75.0%	9	32.4%	12
Unknown	28.0%	7	0%	0	18.9%	7
Total	100%	25	100%	12	100%	37

Note: Unknown selected if the archival data did not explicitly state information for that category.

Research Question Two

What were the school district locales of the students with CIs served through the grant?

Table 4 demonstrates the locale breakdown of the 72 students with CIs served indirectly through this grant and the sub-group of 25 students receiving direct services from a deaf educator. Of the 72 students, 75% (*n* = 54) were served in a school district categorized as rural/town, and 25% (*n* = 18) were served in a school district categorized as city/suburb. Twenty-five (25) of the 72 students received direct services from a deaf educator. There was an almost equal distribution between locales for students receiving direct services from a deaf educator: 52% of the students (*n* = 13) were in rural/town locales, and 48% of the students (*n* = 12) in city/suburb locales.

Of all the participants, including those who did not receive deaf education services, only 24.1% (*n* = 13) of students in the rural/town locales were receiving direct services from a deaf educator. In city/suburb locales, 66.7% (*n* = 12) of students were being serviced directly by a deaf educator.

Table 4 also delineates the locale in comparison to primary mode of communication, grade range at implantation, language performance, and speech intelligibility. In regard to primary mode of communication, data indicated that in rural/town locales, most students used either gestures and vocalizations or spoken English only. Whereas in the city/suburb districts, there was a nearly equal distribution of students among communication modes, except for sign language only. Additionally, the pattern of when students were implanted across the four grade range categories was similar in both

locales. For example, data indicated that 46.3% (*n* = 25) of students in rural/town locales were implanted during early intervention and 44.4% (*n* = 8) of students served in city/suburb areas were implanted during early intervention. Lastly, a similar pattern was seen across the two locale categories for language performance. In both the rural/town and city/suburb locales, 33.3% (*n* = 6) of students were in the limited language performance sub-category.

Differences were noted by locale when analyzing student's speech intelligibility. The rural/town locale had 55.6% (*n* = 30) of students' speech stated as overall intelligible. In the city/suburb locale 33.3% (*n* = 6) of students' speech was explicitly stated as overall intelligible.

Table 4

Primary Mode of Communication, Grade Range at Implantation, Language Performance, and Speech Intelligibility According to Locale

	Locale			
	Rural/Town		City/Suburb	
	%	*n*	%	*n*
Participants (*n* = 72)	75.0%	54	25.0%	18
Participants receiving deaf education services (*n* = 25)	52.0%	13	48.0%	12
Primary Mode of Communication (*n* = 72)				
Gestures and Vocalizations	48.1%	26	33.3%	6
Spoken English Only	33.3%	18	38.9%	7
Spoken English and Sign	13.0%	7	27.8%	5
Sign Language Only	5.6%	3	0%	0
Total	100%	54	100%	18
Grade Range at Implantation (*n* = 72)				
Early Intervention	46.3%	25	44.4%	8
Early Childhood	31.5%	17	16.7%	3
Kindergarten- 3rd	13.0%	7	0%	0
4th- 12th	5.5%	3	5.6%	1
Unknown	3.7%	2	33.3%	6
Total	100%	54	100%	18
Language Performance (*n* = 72)				
Limited Language Performance	33.3%	18	33.3%	6
Below Grade Level	31.5%	17	16.7%	3
At Grade Level	20.4%	11	22.2%	4
Unknown	14.8%	8	27.8%	5
Total	100%	54	100%	18

Speech Intelligibility (*n* = 72)				
Overall Intelligible	55.6%	30	33.3%	6
Overall Unintelligible	29.6%	16	33.3%	6
Unknown	14.8%	8	33.3%	6
Total	100%	54	100%	18

Note. The participants receiving deaf education services were the 25 students receiving direct services from a deaf educator at the time of consultation. Unknown selected if the archival data did not explicitly state information for that category.

Research Question Three

What were the provider types of the professionals who served students with CIs during this grant cycle?

The data indicated that 187 service providers served the 72 students. Table 5 distributes the frequency of each service provider serving students with CIs through this grant. This data does not demonstrate a one-to-one correspondence between student and service provider because one student could have multiple service providers. The most frequently reported service providers were general education teachers followed closely by speech language pathologists. As mentioned previously, 25 of the students with CIs (35.7%) received direct services from a deaf educator. Students were over two times more likely to be served by a speech language pathologist than by a deaf educator.

Only two groups of service providers had a communication match of 96% or better with their students who had CIs, deaf educators (96%) and interpreters (100%). However, of the students served by special education teachers, 48.1% did not have a communication match with their teacher. Lastly, general educators had the highest frequency count but only had a communication match with 70.4% of the students they served. This means that in a room of 10 students, approximately three of them would not have a communication match with their general educator.

Table 5

Frequency of Service Providers and Percentage of Communication Match with Students

	Communication Match				
	Yes		No		N/A[b]
Service Provider Type	%	*n*	%	*n*	*n*
General Education	70.4%	38	29.6%	16	18
SLP[a]	76.9%	40	23.1%	12	20
Special Educator	51.9%	14	48.1%	13	45
Deaf Educator	96%	24	4%	1	47
Interpreter	100%	15	0%	0	57
Paraprofessional	64.3%	9	35.7%	5	58

Note. This does not indicate a one-to-one match between students and service provider because students could be receiving multiple services and amount of service time is unknown.

[a] Speech Language Pathology

[b] Not served by that service provider type

Further examination of the data warranted removing students identified as utilizing gestures and vocalizations since they did not, at the time of the study, display a true language. Gestures and vocalization are merely steppingstones to language development; therefore, it is pertinent to closely examine this data excluding this as a communication modality. By doing so, this eliminates 44.4% (*n* = 32) of the students. This data is displayed in Table 6, and the lack of communication match is still relevant. After removing these students who used gestures and vocalizations, 12% of general educators and 22% of special educators *did not* have a communication match with the students they were serving. Additionally, 28.6% of paraprofessionals *did not* have a communication match with the students they served.

Table 6

Frequency of Service Providers and Percentage of Communication Match with Students Whose Primary Communication Modality Was Not Gestures and Vocalizations

	Communication Match				
	Yes		No		N/A[b]
Service Provider Type	%	*n*	%	*n*	*n*
General Education	88%	29	12%	4	7
SLP[a]	87.5%	21	12.5%	3	16
Special Educator	78%	7	22%	2	31
Deaf Educator	100%	16	0%	0	24
Interpreter	100%	7	0%	0	33
Paraprofessional	71.4%	5	28.6%	2	33

Note. This does not indicate a one-to-one match between students and service provider because students could be receiving multiple services and amount of service time is unknown.

[a] Speech Language Pathology

[b] Not served by that service provider type

Upon further review of the data, researchers examined the breakdown of language performance (at grade level, below grade level and limited language) among those who did (*n* = 21) and did not (*n* = 38) receive direct services from a deaf educator. Data related to language performance was not available for 13 students, so the following results are interpreted among 59 students. Results indicated of the students that received direct deaf education services, most had either limited language performance (42.9%, *n* = 9) or were at grade level (38.1%, *n* = 8) in regard to language performance. Among those who did not receive direct deaf education services, a majority was found to have limited (39.5%, *n* = 15) or below grade level (42%, *n* = 16) in regard in language performance with only 18.4% (*n* = 7) of these students performing at grade level.

Discussion

This paper and its findings add to the existing literature by identifying the disparities in language, access to deaf education services, and communication match among students with CIs. In doing so, this study informs the field of the educational experiences these students have, namely within rural/town regions. Additionally, illuminating such disparities revealed in this study will help to identify targeted areas of needed improvement among complexities often associated with students who are DHH

Overview of the Findings

In addressing research question one, the data revealed that, alarmingly, most students in this study primarily communicated through gestures and vocalizations. It should be emphasized that gestures and vocalizations is *not* a communication modality nor is it a language. Whether these students were in early childhood (53.1%) or K-12 (46.9%) at the time of consultation, these students had not yet acquired a language. In other words, these students were unable to sufficiently access the curriculum. Given the ages of the participants, some may have diminished neuroplasticity and were past the critical period for language development, resulting in the irreversible consequences of language delays and deprivation (Cole & Flexer, 2016; Hall, 2017; Hall et al., 2019). To offset these consequences, school districts need to provide these students with direct and intensive services to help close the gap in their language performance compared to their peers who are hearing. Furthermore, school districts may need to revisit the LRE and its inclusive practices to ensure that the educational programming provided to students is one that embraces the language, academic and socioemotional needs of the child (Silvestri & Hartman, 2022).

The spoken English only group was the second largest communication mode group in this study and overall yielded the most positive results. A majority of these students were reported to be performing at grade level and exhibiting overall intelligible speech. It is important to note that the majority of the aforementioned students were in grades 4-12 at the time of the study. These results appear contrary to some literature in which “no significant difference” was found in the development of language among CI users (Connor et al., 2000; Yanbay et al., 2014). However, the benefits of early implantation (Connor et al., 2000; Cupples et al., 2018; Ching, 2015; Ching et al., 2017; Raeve, 2010) and/or early intervention (Geers et al., 2019; Vohr et al., 2011) have been well-documented and could explain the results proffered in this study.

For research question two, the data indicated that rural/town service providers sought out CI consultation services more often than service providers in city/suburb areas, 75% and 25% respectively. The data also disclosed that of the students in rural school districts, only 24.1% of these students received direct services from a deaf educator, compared to the city/suburban districts with 66.7% receiving direct deaf education services. This data suggests that students with CIs in rural school districts were disproportionately underserved by deaf educators and supports the notion that city/suburb school districts have more access to resources for students. Therefore, previous claims of challenges associated with recruitment and retention efforts of qualified educators in rural school districts are well substantiated and prove to be a consistent area of concern (Rude et al, 2005). To address recruitment, retention and preparation of qualified educators, universities may need to explore alternative teacher pathways (see Jameson et al., 2019). Consequently, MWDED and Midwest University have engaged in

a collaborative partnership to actively explore alternative teacher pathways; more on this is provided in a forthcoming section of this article. Furthermore, grants and other funding opportunities may become imperative to provide supports to university resources as well as to potential teacher candidates in rural areas to obtain the training and certification necessary to provide quality services to low-incidence populations such as students who are DHH. Additional research could be completed to aid in recruitment of deaf educators into rural areas and overcome these service complications.

With respect to research question three, results of this study indicated that only 35.7% (or 25 out of 187) of the service providers were deaf educators. Students were nearly twice as likely to be served by an speech-language pathologist (SLP) than a deaf educator. Also, when analyzing the participants' communication match (including those who primarily communicated using gestures and vocalizations) with their service providers, special educators only had a communication match with about half of the students whom they were serving. If some students with CIs are being served by special education teachers rather than deaf educators (Reynolds et al., 2014) and there is only a communication match with about 50% of the special educators, it brings into question the students' access to communication, academics, and learning.

Limitations of the Study

The results and discussion should be viewed with consideration of potential limitations. A limitation was that this study provided only a snapshot. The archival data presented one year of student information in only a student's first year of participation. Without longitudinal data, growth or change over time was unknown. Also, within the actual participant pool, the number of participants with a primary mode of communication of sign language only displayed less than an 'n' of five, which was also noted in some other variables sub-groups. As a result, the researchers were not able to conduct robust statistical analyses to determine whether there was a statistically significant difference among the frequency tables. While there is no statistical data to accompany this data, the cross-tabulation analyses allude to notable consequences that merit further examination as well as supports claims for funding and creative pathways toward providing quality services to all students who are DHH.

Although multiple variables were reported within the research to answer the research questions, there were other data points that if included (e.g., age at amplification, early intervention services, and additional disabilities) may have increased the understanding of the population studied. The researchers were limited in how much data to analyze and report; therefore, these variables warrant further investigation to increase understanding and research implications. Furthermore, the researchers coded language level according to the student's grade as opposed to their age. While this is valuable information for readers, the researchers acknowledge that this does not account

for students who might be delayed or held back. Given the study methods, age-related data regarding language level is not available and warrants further investigation.

A couple of service provider limitations surfaced. Communication match was determined for each service provider type, and data was reported individually. Service provider type was reported and analyzed in aggregate form as opposed to across participants. Therefore, while the data indicates a clear disproportionate communication modality mismatch, the data might be skewed. More specifically, the unreported crossover of an interpreter in the classroom may have positively impacted the achievements for some students regardless of the mismatch of communication modes with other professionals. There was an additional known crossover in the category of SLP. There were two additional professional groups who met appropriate state guidelines to provide direct services to the students but who were not licensed SLPs. These three professionals have differing levels of education and licensure and or certification, which may have influenced the quality and outcome of services provided. Given the premise that most districts contacted Midwest University for consultation for those students who were struggling, a complete picture of service providers for children who were performing well could not be made.

Lastly, study data did not include the data of school districts who had attempted to hire a deaf educator without success, nor did it consider the number of consultations or resources shared with given districts. This data could have shown the concerted effort by some districts to meet the educational and communication needs of students with CIs. Also, there were multiple consultation attempts to identify potential districts who not only had a deaf educator but who were also willing to allow a district to contract for services. Results yielded limited success.

Implications and Future Research

Overall, this study presented insights into the population of public school students with cochlear implants whose school districts received CI consultation services within a Midwest region. This study also identified a variety of challenges and unmet needs of some students with CIs throughout this region. Future research can potentially help to further analyze these areas of needs as well as create potential solutions to better serve students with CIs, especially in underserved rural areas and for students with limited language.

School districts, departments of education at the state and national levels, and institutions of higher education may need to think outside the box to provide deaf education services in rural areas. Rural school districts and state departments of education may consider pooling resources to form a cooperative as a means of providing direct deaf education services for these students. In recent years, the delivery of services has extended beyond the traditional methods to include telepractice or virtual options, which increases the capacity to service a wider range of individuals including those in

rural locations (Barr et al., 2018). While these methods of service delivery may provide unprecedented benefits, especially for those in rural and/or remote areas, more research and investigation regarding practices and outcomes is prudent among those who are DHH (Barr et al., 2018; Lund et al, 2022). Furthermore, increasing direct and intensive language-rich intervention services to some students with CIs, especially those students with limited language, may be warranted. Front-loading services in the early years, including early intervention years, could build a strong foundation of language on which to build academic success.

Higher education institutions may explore grants and technology to make teacher preparation programs more accessible to potential teachers from rural areas who may stay in rural areas to teach (Sindelar et al., 2018). In response to the disparity among DHH students as well as the stark need for deaf educators, MWDED and Midwest University took action to address these mounting concerns. To create statewide and even nationwide impact, Midwest University's deaf education program created a specific pathway for those teachers who have an undergraduate degree and current certification, both in special education. The pathway allows current special education teachers to take specific coursework as well as practicum to develop their knowledge and skills related to DHH students. Coursework and practica were designed to allow special education teachers to continue to teach full-time while completing this pathway part-time in a two-year timeframe. Upon completion of this pathway and state-level assessment(s), special education teachers will hold a Master of Science in Education, Special Education: Education of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing and qualify for teacher certification in Deaf/Hard of Hearing (Birth–12).

Grant support through MWDED was given to Midwest University to reduce financial barriers for a limited number of eligible special education teachers in their state. Furthermore, this pathway reduces financial and location barriers for special education teachers within rural areas as the coursework is offered almost exclusively through distance learning. Subsequently, this pathway has the potential to increase the likelihood of rural school districts employing educators who are dually certified in Special Education (K-12) and Deaf/Hard of Hearing (Birth-12). Ultimately, this innovative pathway for special education teachers may contribute to improved service delivery and educational outcomes for students who are DHH across the state and nation.

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About the Authors

Karen Engler, Ed.D., is a clinical professor in the Department of Counseling, Leadership, and Special Education at Missouri State University. She is the coordinator of the graduate Special Education - Education of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing program and was the Director of Secondary Education, Office of the Provost from 2016–2022. Karen has over 30 years of service to MSU and for the past 15 years, has been the principal investigator of a statewide cochlear implant consultation grant. Her decades of field experience primarily focused on children who are deaf and hard of hearing and their families and cochlear implant habilitation. Her research includes deaf education teacher preparation as well as learners who are deaf or hard of hearing, especially in underserved areas. karenengler@missouristate.edu

Sonia Arora, Ph.D., is an assistant professor in the Deaf/Hard of Hearing program within the Department of Special Education at Illinois State University. Prior to Illinois State University, she was a visiting assistant professor at Missouri State University from 2018–2021 and served as an itinerant teacher in Kansas. Sonia earned a bachelor's degree from the University of Kansas, a master's degree from Missouri State University, and a PhD from Teachers College, Columbia University. Her primary areas of research focus on children who are deaf and hard of hearing as well as teacher preparation. sbarora@ilstu.edu

Kennedy Rice, M.S., earned both bachelor's and master's degrees in Education of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing from Missouri State University. She has worked as a teacher of the Deaf since 2018. knconn@ssdmo.org

Dani Willhite, M.S., earned both bachelor's and master's degrees in Communication Sciences and Disorders - Education of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing from Missouri State University. She has been a teacher of the Deaf since 2018. Currently, she is a doctoral student studying Curriculum Development and Instruction at Kansas State University. Her current research focuses on an autoethnographic exploration of perceived interpersonal working relationships among teachers of the Deaf and American Sign Language interpreters. dwillhite@ssdmo.org

Allison Baker, M.S., earned a bachelor's degree in Communication Sciences and Disorders from Worcester State University and a master's degree in Communication Sciences and Disorders - Education of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing from Missouri State University. She has been a teacher of the Deaf since 2020. abaker@missouristate.edu

Jill Oswalt, M.A., CCC-SLP, is Emeritus Faculty at Missouri State University. She served as the Clinic Director in Department of Communication Sciences and Disorders for the audiology, education of deaf and hard hearing, and speech pathology graduate programs, with over 40 years of clinical experience in home, school, hospital, and clinical settings, across the life span of the individual. Her areas of interest and specialization include assessment and intervention of children with cochlear implants, assessment of graduate student learning and collaboration, and pediatric dysphagia. JillOswalt@missouristate.edu

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Book Review: Culturally Responsive Care in the Rural Classroom

Wiktoria Kozlowska, *Purdue University*

Book Reviewed: *Struggling to find our way: Rural educators' experiences working with and caring for Latinx students,* by Stephanie Oudghiri: Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing, 2022. ISBN: 979-8-88730-072-6. 203 pages.

***Keywords*: Latinx immigrant students, culturally responsive teaching, elementary education, Struggling to Find our Way**

In *Struggling to Find Our Way: Rural Educators' Experiences Working with and Caring for Latinx Students*, the author seeks to understand how Latinx immigrant students in a rural Midwestern school district are presently and pervasively underserved by the educators who purport to care for them. Using a methodology of narrative inquiry, Oudghiri reflects on a year's worth of observations in a rural Indiana elementary school. She persistently rearranges the "puzzle pieces" of the "entangled lives" (Oudghiri, 2022, p. 10) of her participants to explore deeply how rural educators perceive and describe their relationships with immigrant students and families. Oudghiri reveals each educator's "ethic of care" (p. 25), or lack thereof, and how such modes of caring are influenced by daily instances of personal and professional identity formation. Indeed, the idea of *care* for diverse youth is woven throughout the entirety of Oudghiri's work: her position within the field of education echoes scholars such as Noddings (2012), who claims that "establishing such a climate [of care] . . . is *underneath* all we do" (emphasis in original, p. 777), and Gay (2002), who famously honors the "characteristics, experiences, and perspectives" (p. 106) of culturally diverse students. *Struggling to Find Our Way* thus seeks to prepare an audience of rural educators to care in a culturally responsive manner.

Dr. Stephanie Oudghiri currently serves as a clinical assistant professor of Curriculum Studies at Purdue University. Her research include social justice and ethics of care for minoritized students in rural communities, particularly those of Latinx immigrant background. Oudghiri describes herself as "a daughter of an immigrant, a former teacher of immigrant students, a current teacher educator, and a resident of a rural Midwestern community" (2022, p. 5). Her diverse teaching experiences in rural and urban districts, as well as her own memories of marginalization in school, have sparked in Oudghiri a frustration with systemic inequities and a desire to conduct research as a form of advocacy for underserved students. Chapters One and Two of *Struggling to Find Our*

Way explore this personal positionality as well as introduce demographic data on both rural education and Latinx immigrant students. Chapters Three and Four dive deeply into Oudghiri's chosen methodology of narrative inquiry and her care-based theoretical framework; they also contain the bulk of the classroom narratives that serve as the heart of the story. In Chapters Five and Six, Oudghiri analyzes these narratives through a lens of care, then artfully reimagines them in the form of a play centered around a kitchen table. Chapter Seven takes on the format of a podcast episode offering advice to pre-service educators grappling with Oudghiri's work. Finally, Chapter Eight provides an update on the rural school community in which the story is situated.

The story behind *Struggling to Find Our Way*'s stories is a critical one: rural communities, according to Oudghiri, "have historically been overlooked" (p. 16) in educational research, and literature on immigrant students within rural districts is particularly sparse. Oudghiri includes ample citations (e.g., Indiana University Public Policy Institute, 2016; Showalter et al., 2019) to establish the importance of her research. Indiana holds one of the largest populations of U.S. students attending rural schools, and with less than forty percent of Latinx students graduating from Indiana high schools, the need to examine Latinx student experiences in the rural districts of Oudghiri's home state is clear. Her choice of narrative inquiry as a methodology allows her to not only retell the stories of the classrooms in which she conducts her study, but to "situate those experiences within [the] larger context" (p. 32) of rural education nationwide. Care is paramount to all educators, and Oudghiri's use of Swanson's (1991, 1993) middle range theory of caring as a theoretical framework allows her to unpack how teachers and paraprofessionals exhibit "*knowing, being with, doing for, enabling,* and *maintaining belief*" (emphasis in original, p. 71) in their relationships with Latinx immigrant students. Gay (2002) emphasizes that "culturally responsive caring is *action oriented*" (emphasis in original, p. 110); indeed, Oudghiri (2022) draws from the work of Swanson specifically because it "expresses care theories in action" (p. 71). The result of these deliberate choices — Oudghiri's repeated "returning to [her] research puzzle" (p. 72) through various lenses — is a harmonious series of stories that function, too, as a call to action.

Oudghiri's findings are sometimes encouraging, often visceral, and frequently eye-opening to the harsh realities many Latinx immigrant students face in their classrooms. One participant, for example, flounders in her attempts to connect with these students. Narratives demonstrate her inability to *know* or *enable* her students when she bars the use of Spanish in her classroom; *be with* them when she openly questions her undocumented "students' placement within the classroom" (p. 88); or *do for* them when she isolates one student inside a square of blue painter's tape. This teacher, Oudghiri concludes, fails to *maintain belief* in her Latinx immigrant students, and this lack of hope obstructs her ability to "embrac[e] the other caring processes" (p. 94). Other educators are more successful, such as an ESL paraprofessional whom Oudghiri highlights as *maintaining* a "fundamental" belief in "her students as learners and human beings" (p.

108). Her own Latinx Spanish-speaking background informs her desire to simultaneously uphold the heritage language of her students and acknowledge their vulnerability, even when she is "constrained by the realities of being the only ESL paraprofessional" in the school (p. 104). Ultimately, many readers will likely see themselves in Linda, the remaining participant whose practices fall somewhere in-between: though Linda *maintains* an attitude of hope, her actions are influenced by her subconscious belief that her Latinx immigrant students must achieve "dominant classroom norms" (p. 83). She is able to *do for* these students by recognizing their strengths and purposefully selecting dual language stories, for example, but her treatment of bilingual students as a proxy for communication with Spanish-speaking students inhibits her capacity for *knowing*, *being with*, or *enabling* either the former or the latter group. On their own, Oudghiri's reflections on these narratives are already illuminating; the addition of Chapter Six's imagined kitchen table conversations — which combine unaltered participant transcript data with paraphrased words of scholars such as Noddings and Gay — allows Oudghiri to draw even more thoughtful conclusions, such as the fact that schools lack sufficient resources to support students' mental and emotional health, or, critically, that there is a need for "communities [to] work with one another" (p. 168). These major themes situate Oudghiri's unique findings in a more systemic context.

Struggling to Find Our Way is a stellar example of all of narrative inquiry's core tenets at work. Detailed and inviting descriptions of settings and participants, for example, make the work readable and engaging; such accessibility is "a hallmark of narrative inquiry" (Kim, 2016, p. 112). The "autobiographical touchstone[s]" (Oudghiri, 2022, p. 4) included throughout the work call for reflection on Oudghiri's own opportunities for improvement (Adams, 2017), and her openness to such accountability leads her to share multiple stories of times she "could have done more" (Oudghiri, 2022, p. 20) as an educator. Such attention to her methodology of choice makes *Struggling to Find Our Way* a relatable story, eliminating some of the fear that accompanies the acknowledgment of one's shortcomings in the classroom. Oudghiri writes: "I wonder how you will imagine yourself within each story — as a second and/or third grader, a classroom teacher, or a researcher" (p. 50). Indeed, it is easy, as a reader, to step into each pair of shoes, and I recommend this work to each of the above communities. However, I recommend it most to in- and pre-service rural educators. Based on conversations with her own pre-service students, the penultimate chapter of the book addresses "a way of looking toward future experiences" (p. 171) by answering authentic questions in the form of a podcast transcript. Oudghiri offers numerous suggestions — such as educating oneself on immigration policy, visiting the homes and community spaces of students and families, and "seeking out the help of cultural brokers" (p. 185) to bridge gaps of understanding — that orient themes drawn from previous narratives toward new forms of action. Directions for reflective activities and a list of discussion questions frame this work as an opportunity for educators to learn and grow.

Ultimately, Oudghiri's story is one of hope. After a brief reflection on the state of the community in which she conducted her research, she concludes *Struggling to Find Our Way* by describing herself as "hopeful that we can prepare future educators to acknowledge, support, and celebrate the social, ethnic, racial, and cultural diversity of students" (p. 180). While teachers of Latinx immigrant students may find this book particularly enlightening, any rural educator of diverse youth can benefit from these stories and the opportunities they provide. *Struggling to Find Our Way is a work* of both honesty and optimism and, thus, precisely the type of work needed to bring rural communities and the schools that serve them closer together.

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About the Author

Wiktoria Kozlowska holds a B.S. in Mathematics with a concentration in Secondary Education from the University of Notre Dame. She is currently a second-year master's student in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction's Curriculum Studies program at Purdue University. Before beginning her graduate studies, she taught mathematics at a public suburban middle school for two years. Her research interests include narrative studies that examine the schooling experiences of students belonging to marginalized populations, particularly those who are undocumented, to increase educators' understanding of how such students' strengths and needs may be more thoroughly addressed.

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Schedule and submission dates

Spring 2024	January 15th	General topics
Fall 2024	March 27th	**TBA**
Spring 2025	January 15th	General topics
Fall 2025	February 28th	Special issue **TBA**

The editors of the *Theory & Practice in Rural Education* would like to invite authors to submit manuscripts for forthcoming issues. *Theory & Practice in Rural Education* is a peer-reviewed journal published electronically twice per year, spring and fall. We are predominantly interested in manuscripts related to promising and effective educational practices in rural schools, educator preparation for rural P-16 institutions, and issues related to distinct rural populations. We invite several types of articles and/or multimedia creations, including those with an international focus: practice-based; educational innovations; partnerships for education; research-based articles; review articles; and book reviews focusing on rural education. (Please see Author Guidelines at the website for additional submission information.)

All proposals will be subject to double blind peer review.

Dr. Kristen Cuthrell, Director
Rural Education Institute, College of Education, East Carolina University
Mail Stop 122 (Building 123), Greenville, NC 27858-4353 | 252.328.5748