

Editorial: Rural Education Policies, Practices, and Promising Initiatives

Robert D. Quinn, *Professor of Art Education, Rural Education Institute Research and Innovation Associate*

The publication of *Theory & Practice in Rural Education* (TPRE) enters its eighth year. We are thrilled to continue fulfilling the journal's mission by publishing ten high-quality articles that address theoretical, empirical, and practical issues in rural education. In this issue, our first two articles comprising the Practice Forum focus on promising initiatives that strengthen resources directed toward rural teachers and students, while this issue's remaining eight articles comprising the Research Forum target a wide variety of topics related to Rural Education, beginning with a further exploration of issues related to counseling and mental health that were raised in the second article of the Practice Forum. The articles that follow address several novel approaches to contemporary rural educational issues ranging from educational leadership, absenteeism, and rural teacher shortages. Authors make strong cases for serious consideration of implementation of unique approaches designed to better meet the various needs of rural teachers, students, counselors, and administrators.

Article Synopses

Dean and colleagues' describe an initiative at Clemson University designed to strengthen teacher preparation through a university–school district partnership in a rural South Carolina community. Grounded in asset-based, culturally responsive, and place-based education, the initiative sought to address the disconnect between university coursework and the needs of rural schools by engaging preservice teachers as co-designers of their learning. In collaboration with the School District of Pickens County, faculty, community partners, and preservice teachers explored outdoor learning, participated in community-based experiences, and developed a four-course bundle for preservice and in-service educators. One course launched in Fall 2025, incorporating school-site experiences, community expertise, outdoor lesson planning, safety, accessibility, and standards alignment. Preliminary feedback indicated that participants expanded their understanding and application of outdoor learning and developed stronger connections to local communities and educators. The authors conclude that collaborative, place-conscious teacher education can leverage rural cultural wealth, enhance professional preparation, and provide a model for other rural-serving universities.

Purgason and colleagues present the School Counseling Professional Partnership, a 12-year university–school collaboration designed to strengthen mental health services in rural schools while preparing graduate students for rural school counseling practice. The model adapts the Professional Development Schools (PDS) approach by placing six school counseling graduate students in a high-need rural elementary school for a 22-week practicum under joint supervision from a licensed school counselor



and university faculty member. Students deliver mental health supports across a multitiered system of supports (MTSS), including classroom social-emotional learning lessons, targeted psychoeducational groups, and individual counseling. During the 2024–2025 academic year, practicum students served 485 students through Tier 1 services, 120 through 24 Tier 2 groups, and 20 through Tier 3 counseling. Participants and school staff reported benefits including increased student support, professional development, collaboration, and preparation for rural practice. Approximately 67% of the most recent cohort obtained rural school counseling positions after graduation. The authors conclude that this partnership offers a promising model for addressing rural counselor shortages and improving school-based mental health access.

Tuttle and colleagues evaluate the first year of the School Counseling Integrated Program (SCIP), a U.S. Department of Education-funded initiative designed to strengthen mental health services in rural Alabama schools through interdisciplinary collaboration among school counselors, school nurses, and English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) teachers. Eight school counseling master's students received training in integrative care, Social Determinants of Health, and the roles of collaborating professionals before applying their knowledge during rural practicum and internship experiences. Using pre- and post-surveys and a focus group, researchers examined changes in participants' knowledge, attitudes, and perceptions. Although knowledge scores did not show statistically significant changes, participants' attitudes toward collaboration and integrative care improved significantly. Focus group findings highlighted frequent collaboration with individual professionals but limited three-way collaboration, with language barriers, scheduling difficulties, staffing shortages, limited resources, and differing professional perspectives creating challenges. The authors conclude that interdisciplinary training can strengthen rural school mental health services and recommend broader implementation and further research with larger, more diverse samples.

Locklear's narrative inquiry examines how rural Queer, Trans, Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (QTBIPOC) students perceive and experience school counseling related to sexual/affectional and gender identity. The study addresses a gap in research on how rurality, race, and queer/trans identities intersect to shape perceptions of counseling safety, relevance, and cultural responsiveness. Six recent high school graduates participated in written reflections and 60–90-minute semi-structured interviews. Researchers used within-case narrative analysis and cross-case coding to identify six themes. Findings indicate that students often viewed counselors primarily as academic advisors, creating uncertainty about whether identity-related concerns were appropriate for counseling. Help-seeking was shaped by perceived community conservatism, visibility, confidentiality risks, family stigma, and counselors' cultural and LGBTQ+ competence. Positive experiences emerged when counselors demonstrated rapport, acceptance, confidentiality, explicit affirmation, and advocacy. Participants also emphasized that small, context-sensitive actions could meaningfully disrupt heteronormative silence. The authors recommend explicitly communicating counseling's scope, strengthening multicultural and LGBTQ+-affirming competence, protecting privacy, and adapting advocacy practices to rural contexts.

Priyanti and colleagues examine the growing adoption and implementation of four-day school weeks (4DSWs) in Texas, focusing on calendar structures and the demographic and geographic characteristics of participating districts. Researchers analyzed school calendars from 1,021 Texas districts and identified 185 districts using 4DSWs during 2024–2025. Two models emerged: full 4DSWs, used by 79.5% of adopting districts, and hybrid/modified schedules used by 20.5%. Most adopting districts are rural and serve higher proportions of White and economically disadvantaged students and lower proportions of English learners than statewide averages. The fifth day is primarily used for teacher-centered activities, including professional development and planning; relatively few districts provide student tutorials or enrichment. The study situates these findings within existing research showing mixed effects on attendance, teacher recruitment and retention, finances, and academic achievement. The authors conclude that 4DSWs vary considerably in design and purpose and call for future research examining how these differences influence student and teacher outcomes.

Dean Hughes and colleagues' qualitative case study examines the experiences of three rural students participating in a "Grow Your Own" (GYO) teacher education program designed to address persistent teacher shortages in a southeastern rural community. The program recruited high school students, provided teacher preparation and classroom experiences, and offered college scholarships in exchange for teaching service in their home community. Drawing on interviews, a focus group, photographs, and archival materials, the researchers examined how participants navigated university education and how rurality, relationships, and diversity shaped their experiences. Findings identified three themes: rural diversity and sociocultural context, rural community and kinship, and rural resilience and resourcefulness. Participants viewed teaching as an opportunity to strengthen their communities and increase representation, particularly for Latino students, while also experiencing tensions related to family expectations, low perceptions of teaching, financial obligations, and pressure to return home. The authors conclude that GYO programs can leverage rural cultural wealth while emphasizing the need to center students' linguistic, racial, and cultural strengths.

Ferrell's qualitative study examines how race and rurality intersect to shape the mathematics identities of African American students. Using narrative inquiry, the researcher explored the K–12 mathematics experiences of five African American college students who attended rural schools in the southern United States. Data were collected through two to three semi-structured interviews with each participant and analyzed through narrative portraits and cross-case thematic analysis. Three major themes emerged: variability in mathematics experiences, the central role of teacher relationships, and the importance of peer support. Participants described how inconsistent instructional quality and limited access to advanced coursework constrained their opportunities, while affirming teacher relationships strengthened confidence and belonging. Supportive peers promoted persistence, whereas racial isolation in advanced mathematics courses increased feelings of vulnerability. The study concludes that mathematics identity is shaped by the intersection of race, geography, relationships, and structural inequities. The author

recommends culturally responsive teaching, expanded access to rigorous coursework, stronger peer-support structures, and increased recruitment of teachers of color in rural schools.

Hott and colleagues' mixed-methods multiple-case study examines whether brief, non-evaluative instructional coaching could enhance implementation fidelity of the Second Step® social-emotional learning (SEL) curriculum among rural elementary special education teachers. Conducted within a high-need special education school, the study involved four teachers who participated in six or seven weekly cycles of remote observation, feedback, and coaching. Quantitative findings indicated gains in curriculum fidelity: all teachers achieved 100% implementation fidelity by the sixth observation, while teaching and engagement and classroom climate and management improved, although variability remained. Qualitative thematic analysis of teacher and administrator interviews generated five themes emphasizing adaptive implementation, transformative non-evaluative coaching, student-centered indicators of effectiveness, rural contextual influences, and sustainability through professional identity. Participants described increased confidence, pedagogical skill, and responsiveness to students with disabilities. The authors conclude that targeted coaching may provide a feasible mechanism for strengthening SEL implementation and supporting sustainable practice in resource-constrained rural special education settings.

Mullen & Cannon's integrative review examines chronic absenteeism in rural U.S. schools through an educational leadership lens, asking how research identifies contributing factors, challenges, and strategies for addressing nonattendance. Guided by Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, the review synthesizes literature published primarily between 2015 and March 2026, including 107 peer-reviewed sources and a focused analysis of 12 studies. Thematic analysis identified three interrelated themes: chronic absenteeism emerges from complex ecological conditions; adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) contribute to absenteeism and adverse educational outcomes; and leadership interventions can support improved attendance and student performance. Findings emphasize interacting influences across family, school, community, and broader structural systems, including poverty, transportation limitations, healthcare access, trauma, housing instability, school climate, and family-school relationships. The authors identify trauma-informed leadership, data-driven monitoring, personalized interventions, school-family-community partnerships, professional development, and strengths-based, place-conscious practices as promising responses. The review concludes that rural absenteeism requires multifaceted, locally responsive leadership strategies that leverage community assets and address interconnected barriers to attendance.

Lowery's qualitative study examines how place shapes the professional identities, decision-making, and leadership practices of rural educational leaders in southwestern Virginia. Drawing on the conceptual framework of Active Aspects of Place as Practiced Space, the study integrates three perspectives: *bricolage*, or creatively leveraging available resources; *métis*, or applying locally grounded practical knowledge; and *terroir*, or the sociocultural wisdom developed through sustained connections to place. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, field observations, and document analysis involving 12 rural school leaders, including superintendents and principals. Thematic analysis identified six themes: the

importance of place, place-based educational initiatives, community involvement, student belonging, local challenges and support systems, and leadership as partnership building. Findings indicate that leaders draw on community relationships, local histories, and environmental assets to develop relevant educational experiences, address resource constraints, and navigate external pressures. The study proposes place-conscious leadership as a framework for responsive, collaborative, and contextually grounded rural educational practice.

Acknowledgements

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Upcoming Changes

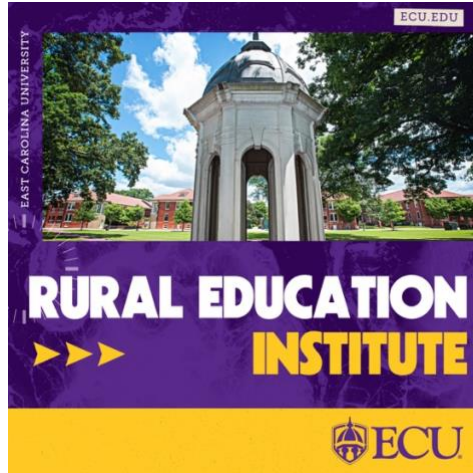
We have an important note to share with our readership. Following publication of this issue, TPRE will be going on a short hiatus while we complete some internal restructuring. Some highlights of that restructuring include a move to a rolling submission and publication schedule (with manuscripts accepted at any time and publication following immediately after final acceptance and editing) and the inclusion of a special section for submissions from recent doctoral graduates (with a process that includes an initial round of critically friendly feedback from an experienced scholar mentor). We expect to be back online and accepting submissions by January 1, 2027. As we look ahead to this relaunch, the journal welcomes scholars and practitioners in the field of rural education to submit their work to the Research Forum, the Practice Forum, the Digital Projects Forum, or the Book Reviews Forum for future issues beginning January 1, 2027.

Additionally, 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. General inquiries about the TPRE should be addressed to Robert Quinn, Executive Editor at quinnr@ecu.edu

About the Author

Robert D. Quinn, Ph.D., is Professor of Art Education in the School of Art and Design at East Carolina University. He serves as a Rural Education Institute Research and Innovation Associate. Previously, he

was a middle- and high-school art teacher in Montgomery, Alabama. His research interests include interdisciplinary approaches to teaching and learning, uses of computer technology for teaching, learning, and teacher education, service-learning and community-engaged scholarship, and arts-based educational research.



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Designing Rural Learning Through University–Preservice Teacher–School District Partnerships

Steph N. Dean, *Clemson University*

Kristen Cuthrell, *Clemson University*

Reagan Nohrenberg, *Clemson University*

Michelle Conley, *Pickens County School District, South Carolina*

This practice-based article examines a university-school-district partnership designed to strengthen rural teacher preparation through student-driven inquiry and place-based education. Grounded in an asset-oriented perspective of rural communities, the work centers on a collaboration between a rural-serving university and a local school district seeking to expand meaningful, place-based outdoor learning opportunities for both preservice and inservice teachers. Drawing on theories of rural cultural wealth and asset-based approaches, the initiative positions preservice teachers not as passive recipients of coursework but as active co-designers of learning experiences rooted in local contexts. Through a structured inquiry process, preservice teachers collaborated with faculty, district leaders, and community partners to design a sequence of courses focused on outdoor and place-based learning. This work was intentionally responsive to district-identified needs and emphasized the strengths, knowledge, and resources embedded within rural communities. The article describes how preservice teachers engaged in experiential learning and curriculum design while working alongside practicing educators and community members. These experiences supported the development of professional identity, strengthened understanding of rural schooling, and fostered a deeper appreciation for the role of place in teaching and learning. By documenting this collaborative process, the article illustrates how student-driven inquiry can function as a powerful tool for aligning teacher preparation with local priorities. The findings highlight the value of centering rural voices and leveraging community assets as a way to create reciprocal partnerships between universities and school districts. Ultimately, this work contributes a practice-based model for designing teacher education that is responsive, place-conscious, and grounded in the lived realities of rural communities.

Keywords: rural education, outdoor learning, place-based education, teacher preparation, university-school-district partnerships; student-driven inquiry

University teacher education programs are often developed independently of the communities they aim to serve, resulting in courses that do not always meet the needs or interests of local stakeholders



(Ferguson et al., 2024). This disconnect can create a gap between theory and practice, leaving students entering the teaching profession without the experiences or tools necessary for success (Yin, 2019). This challenge is particularly pronounced in rural communities, where there is a pressing need to rethink how universities engage with local school districts and preservice teachers (Adams & Farnsworth, 2020; Hudson et al., 2018). Too often, the literature in educator preparation identifies only the deficits of rural schools and associated rural communities (Blanks et al., 2013; Grant et al., 2025). We come to this work with a belief in the wealth and richness of rural communities and a commitment to teaching that is culturally responsive (Crumb et al., 2023; Grant et al., 2025; Ladson-Billings, 1994; McHenry-Sorber et al., 2023). While we understand the challenges within our rural communities, we also embrace the many strengths of the people and places in these communities and utilize those strengths through the promise and possibility of student-driven inquiry.

One timely approach that aligns with this asset-based, culturally responsive commitment is creating opportunities for preservice teacher autonomy. Through student-driven inquiry, preservice teachers take an active role in shaping questions and learning experiences. This approach can provide a collaborative, asset-centered pathway for designing engaging place-based courses that empower emerging educators to thrive in rural school settings and develop the skills necessary to become effective educational professionals. This article describes one such initiative implemented at Clemson University, led by a professor (Steph Dean, Author 1), who convened multiple stakeholders within a rural educational community to foster a collaborative community of learners. The goal was to co-design a series of place-based education courses that meet the needs of local districts while remaining relevant to preservice educators.

We begin by describing the context of a rural partnership among a university, schools, and communities as grounded in the literature, including a case example from the School District of Pickens County focused on place-based outdoor learning. Next, we describe how student-driven inquiry with undergraduate preservice teachers became an avenue for supporting their engagement with local rural environments. Here, we detail the course development process and illustrate how preservice teachers were empowered as agents of change. Finally, we discuss the current progress of these courses at both the undergraduate and graduate levels, offering considerations for other rural-serving teacher education programs and communities interested in adapting similar partnership approaches.

Rural Partnership Context and Relevant Literature

In our state, rural schools face a variety of challenges including persistent high poverty, significant achievement gaps, low funding levels, and logistical challenges due to small populations and remote locations. In this work, we lean into the definition of rurality linked to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) locale codes (Geverdt, 2019) as it is most commonly used (Thier, 2021). However, there is no single definition and more recently, rural scholars have introduced a framework called Rural Definition

Triangulation (RDT) to denote a more nuanced categorization of rurality in educational research (Grant et al., 2024). Grant et al. (2024) encourages scholars to authenticate definitions of rurality along a continuum of site-centric to participant-centric definitions. With this positionality in mind, the author team includes rural teachers involved in this work, sharing their descriptions of their rural contexts and experiences.

In 2023, the state had the nation's third-largest achievement gap between economically disadvantaged and non-economically disadvantaged rural students on the eighth-grade NAEP mathematics assessment (Showalter et al., 2023). Recent findings from Showalter et al. (2025) indicate that the state continues to be ranked eighth among states most in need of critical support for rural education. Four out of every ten schools are located in rural areas, and the state's rural schools and districts are larger than those in nearly all other states. Our rural communities are the third most economically disadvantaged in the United States. Students in rural households move frequently; only four states report higher household mobility rates. The state is ranked fourteenth in rural children who are unhoused. Instructional spending and adjusted teacher salaries remain well below U.S. averages, and academic outcomes in rural schools were within the lowest 20% nationally (Showalter et al., 2023). Given the needs present in rural, economically disadvantaged communities and the resources available at local universities, researchers have suggested that establishing school-university-community collaborations is a key strategy for building student resilience and addressing the long-term impacts of under-resourcing (Reardon & Leonard, 2018). These initiatives can enhance students' ability to learn, improve attendance, and bolster resiliency.

Clemson University's College of Education maintains a long-standing partnership with the School District of Pickens County (SDPC), which serves a mix of rural and small-town communities surrounding the university. Rooted in Clemson's land-grant mission, this collaboration supports and strengthens K-12 education across the state, with particular attention to rural schools. Over the years, the shape of the partnership has shifted, reflecting the interests of university faculty as well as the evolving needs of the district. In recent years, our college has leveraged resources to amplify rural voices and strengthen rural research-practice partnerships. Faculty in the college see the rural school as a hub for community-engaged support of students and families (Mann & Novey, 2021) and believe it is important for rural education leaders to identify, leverage, and allocate supports and resources, including those within their immediate communities, to meet the needs of their staff and students (Henry, 2019). The college's rural work has evolved from the early influences of school-community-university collaboration intended to nurture partnerships that enhance educational opportunities and professional development in support of rural educators. Catelli (2006) found that effective school-community-university partnerships occur when there is a developmental collaboration process in place, shared outcomes exist, and the perspectives of all parties involved are examined.

Within this collaborative partnership, the local district (SDPC) has recently prioritized innovative, experiential learning opportunities, with outdoor learning emerging as a districtwide focus. District leaders have sought to ensure that teachers are confident and prepared to take students outside during the school day in ways that align with state standards. This emphasis aligned closely with the expertise and passion

of one Clemson faculty member (Steph), creating a natural opportunity to deepen collaboration between the university and the district. In response, Clemson faculty engaged in grant writing, professional development, teacher mentoring, and advisory roles with district educators. Ongoing conversations with SDPC stakeholders underscored the importance of collaborating with teachers to design place-based learning opportunities that draw on both the region's natural environment and the strengths of its rural communities.

Hartman et al. (2017) studied collaboration and partnerships among community entities and local rural schools. From their analysis, they recommended the following in working to provide positive outcomes for young children: frequent dialogue between partners, utilizing relevant literature to assist discussions of difficult topics, thinking critically about how to involve key stakeholders in meetings, establishing an environment of collaborative educator training, and conducting ongoing evaluations of programming and partnerships. Additionally, Hartman and colleagues (2017) encouraged educational stakeholders to utilize place-based professional development partnerships and leverage close community ties to extend partnerships that are supportive for children. Other scholars have found that school-university-community partnerships help with teacher recruitment, create programs tailored to specific, local need, provide more accessible modes of course delivery, and cultivate interest in teaching in rural settings (Maheady et al., 2016). School and community collaborators in rural areas should leverage the closeness of rural communities as an asset for facilitating supportive partnerships founded on mutual trust and care for children and the community (Hartman et al., 2017).

The aforementioned literature, along with related scholarship, consistently demonstrates that rural educational systems have distinct needs rooted in their local contexts and geographic distance from universities. These needs can be better addressed through research-practice partnerships that support collaboration grounded in local contexts. As the National Rural Education Association (2022) notes, partnership-based research plays an important role in addressing inequities and building on the strengths of rural communities. While this project does not currently represent a formal research-practice partnership, it reflects many of the principles described by Coburn et al. (2013), including long-term collaboration, shared learning, and attention to problems of practice identified by educators themselves. In this way, the work represents an early step toward more sustained, mutually beneficial relationships in which teacher education is responsive to the lived realities, priorities, and assets of the schools and communities it serves.

In light of the literature on effective rural partnerships, we contend that rural education work should be grounded in and responsive to local contexts while also drawing on frameworks, interdisciplinary methods, and approaches that can be adapted to diverse rural communities. Moreover, rural education research has often been viewed through a deficit lens, portraying rural areas as troubled or lacking, which obscures the recognition of the strengths and opportunities present in these communities. It is crucial to foster and support research that highlights the assets of diverse rural populations (Crumb et al., 2023) and incorporates the viewpoints of rural students, families, community partners, and interdisciplinary professionals. In nurturing partnerships, we draw on the idea of rural cultural wealth, a place-based

conceptual framework rooted in the lived experiences of rural residents (Crumb et al., 2023). This framework acknowledges the multiple strengths and assets of rural people in four primary areas: rural resourcefulness, rural ingenuity, rural familism, and rural community unity. Rural resourcefulness refers to the capacity of rural residents to overcome socio-contextual adversities that threaten their livelihood and wellbeing through taking actions to mitigate limitations. Rural ingenuity refers to the inventiveness and adaptive ability of rural residents. Rural familism is characterized by a feeling of belonging among family members and the integration of individual activities and achievements towards attaining a collective goal. Finally, rural community unity is the outcome of rural residents' understanding of, appreciation for, and social networking around their resources, resulting in unifying and organizing behaviors.

Another key aspect associated with rural education is place-based education. We define place-based education as a model of practice in which teaching and learning are explicitly attentive to the community served by the school. Curriculum is informed by a sense of place (Gruenewald & Smith, 2007; Smith & Sobel, 2010), and instruction and assessment include opportunities for authentic engagement of students within the community (Driscoll & McCusker, 2022; Gott et al., 2023). Place-based education uses hands-on, real-world experiences in the local community and environment as a starting point for instruction in subjects across the curriculum (Guajardo et al., 2016; Sobel, 2005) and community-based engagement positions students to apply what they know and can do in real world settings. This approach engages rural students with meaningful problems, empowering them as learners and contributing members of their communities as they make improvements in their local context (White & Downey, 2021). Higher levels of engagement among K-12 students have been associated with desirable academic and social outcomes generally (Appleton et al., 2008; Shernoff & Schmidt, 2008) and in rural students (Ludden, 2011).

Within teacher education, research demonstrates that place-based approaches embedded within preparation programs can be effective for both in-service educators (Owens, 2015; White & Reid, 2008) and preservice educators (Lux et al., 2022; Schulte, 2018). Such approaches support the development of a sense of place, deepen educators' understanding of how place shapes rural classrooms, and encourage the design of instruction that is responsive to local contexts. Building on this work, we suggest that educator preparation is most effective when it is intentionally grounded in the specific social, cultural, and geographic contexts in which teaching and learning occur (Hudson & Hudson, 2008). Hollins (2011) emphasizes the contextual nature of learning to teach, arguing that the process must be "situated in the cultural and social history of school practices located in particular communities" (p. 3). Along with others, we assert that teachers in rural schools face unique needs and challenges, a claim that has been well documented in the literature and continues to be evident in contemporary scholarship (Gallo & Beckman, 2016; Meier & Edington, 1983; Monk, 2007). As Barley & Brigham (2008) note, "Rural educators have long been calling for special preparation for new teachers to teach in rural schools" (p. 3). Taken together, these perspectives point to the importance of teacher education approaches that move beyond generic preparation to intentionally engage preservice teachers in rural places and practices.

Using Student-Driven Inquiry as a Vehicle for Engaging Preservice Teachers in Rural Spaces

At Clemson University, undergraduate students have the opportunity to engage in student-driven inquiry alongside faculty who design projects rooted in their own research interests. Within the College of Education, Steph created an inquiry focused on place-based outdoor learning. The goal was to give preservice teachers a chance to explore this pedagogy and strengthen the partnership with SDPC, which had expressed a need for educators well-prepared to implement outdoor learning. Thus, the undergraduate preservice teachers were invited into a local school district-university partnership as co-learners and collaborators in advancing place-based outdoor learning. Clemson students were eager to deepen their understanding of outdoor education and to explore ways it could be expanded in the region.

Given SDPC's recent prioritization of innovative instructional approaches such as outdoor learning, the district expressed particular interest in enrolling a cohort of teachers in a graduate-level course on outdoor and place-based pedagogies. The plan was for the course to adopt an asset-based approach, drawing on the area's plentiful outdoor spaces and the people who sustain its rural communities. Thus, the aforementioned undergraduate student-led inquiry was intentionally shaped by the priorities and needs of the local rural school district partner, SDPC.

Within this partnership context, preservice teachers worked alongside Steph to outline goals for their inquiry: experience outdoor learning as it might look in rural K-12 classrooms, broaden their repertoire of rural place-based practices, and design a potential course bundle to prepare both preservice and in-service teachers for outdoor instruction. Students also kept reflective journals to document their learning and transformative moments throughout the year.

To build this foundation, Steph designed and coordinated place-based lessons that immersed the preservice students in outdoor learning environments. Drawing on rural expertise, community partners such as nature center staff, forestry professionals, and SDPC teachers modeled effective practices in bringing learning outdoors. Some lessons also took place on Clemson's own campus, where Steph demonstrated how to integrate the surrounding environment into lessons across science, history, math, and other disciplinary areas. After each experience, students debriefed together, reflecting on their role as learners while analyzing the pedagogical strategies they observed. These reflections were critical, as research shows that preservice teachers who have meaningful outdoor learning experiences during their preparation programs are more likely to implement such practices in their future classrooms (Blatt & Patrick, 2014). Students also identified common place-based practices across the experiences and supplemented their learning with readings that provided theoretical grounding.

A highlight of the inquiry came when students volunteered at an SDPC outdoor learning event for elementary students. Held in a rural setting with minimal amenities but abundant space, the event allowed Clemson students to work directly with district leaders, engage with elementary students from multiple schools, and see firsthand what place-based rural education looks like in practice. SDPC leaders noted the

enthusiasm and passion these preservice teachers brought, affirming the value of their involvement. This event demonstrated the power of bringing together all three stakeholders—undergraduate preservice students, faculty, and the district—in a shared outdoor learning environment.

Once preservice students had built sufficient theoretical and practical knowledge, they began co-designing a four-course bundle for the Clemson College of Education. These courses were intended to prepare both undergraduates and graduate students to teach outdoors in ways that honor the unique cultural and ecological assets of the region's rural communities (see Crumb et al., 2023). Steph provided tentative course titles and descriptions for departmental approval, while students contributed ideas for sequencing, key concepts, and meaningful assignments. They evaluated potential texts for the bundle and discussed course structures, all while taking into account SDPC's specific needs to shape practical applications. Over the course of a month, the group reviewed drafts and refined materials together. Steph then submitted the final bundle through the university's approval process.

The outcomes of this student-led inquiry were multifaceted. Preservice teachers built meaningful memories in outdoor environments and expanded their repertoire of place-based practices. They deepened their engagement with SDPC beyond traditional placements, building relationships with district leadership and community partners. Most importantly, they co-created a rural, asset-centered course bundle designed by students for students that will prepare future preservice teachers at Clemson and in-service teachers within SDPC to engage K-12 learners in education rooted in place and community.

One of the undergraduate preservice teachers who participated in the student-led inquiry (Reagan Nohrenberg, Author 3) shares about this experience in her own words:

Helping to create these classes was both fun and engaging for several reasons. As a student, it was eye-opening to see everything that goes into designing the classes I take each semester. From deciding on assignments to selecting textbooks, collaborating on these decisions was an exciting and meaningful experience. I especially valued the opportunity to talk with other students my age about what we wanted to learn and how we wanted it to be taught. It felt like our voices were genuinely heard and that our ideas would help shape learning experiences centered on what we found important and interesting.

Another reason I really enjoyed this inquiry was the chance to experience the process from the perspective of a future teacher. As an education major, I approached this work with the intention of applying it to my own classroom one day. I was able to take what I was learning about place-based outdoor education and help communicate how it could be implemented by other teachers. This experience showed me that teaching can be fun and engaging without relying on computers or screens.

Overall, this inquiry demonstrated the amount of thought and effort required to make meaningful learning happen at all levels. It reinforced the idea that teachers can deeply engage students through hands-on, place-based experiences that connect learning to the real world around them. As a future teacher, I plan to carry these ideas with me and intentionally use them in my own

classroom. One of the greatest rewards of being part of this experience was the opportunity to connect with others taking these classes. Hearing from a diverse group of participants who were eager to learn about and apply place-based outdoor education within their own fields was incredibly rewarding. This experience has meant a great deal to me, and I am very grateful to have been a part of it.

Reagan's reflection illustrates how student-driven inquiry can reposition preservice teachers as active contributors to the design of their own learning rather than passive recipients of coursework. Her narrative reiterates earlier discussions in this article about the value of centering preservice teachers' voices and expertise within university-school-community partnerships. In this way, Reagan's experience demonstrates how inquiry grounded in place and collaboration can meaningfully shape emerging teachers' professional identities.

Program Progress and Early Outcomes

One of the co-designed courses in the place-based outdoor learning bundle launched in Fall 2025 with both undergraduate and graduate sections. The course focuses on the pedagogical practices of outdoor learning, including lesson planning that aligns with standards, communicating with families about safety and weather considerations, and ensuring accessibility for all students. An important emphasis is helping participants understand their local outdoor spaces and explore ways to incorporate the rural environment into teaching.

In the undergraduate section, preservice teachers at Clemson University have been able to connect with SDPC leadership and community members. Guest speakers have included principals, one of whom serves a remote rural community, a district leader focused on community relations, a rural classroom teacher from SDPC, and a cooperative extension program leader. These visits give preservice teachers the opportunity to learn directly from the people who know their communities best. At the same time, community and district leaders are meeting future educators and contributing to their preparation by investing time and expertise in the course.

In the graduate section, Steph has drawn on preservice teacher work, photographs, and other examples as inspiration. The course is delivered in a hybrid format: part of the class meets virtually through Zoom, while the remaining sessions are held at school sites. This design makes the learning genuinely place-based, as in-service teachers apply concepts directly in their own schoolyards. School-site sessions also strengthen rural cultural wealth by giving teachers opportunities to build relationships, connect with administrators, and become more familiar with the land and the surrounding communities. Assignments, as envisioned in the original student-led inquiry, are intentionally flexible so that each in-service teacher can enact place-based practices in ways that are meaningful within their specific context.

Preliminary feedback has been positive, with both preservice and in-service teachers reporting that the course significantly shaped their conceptualizations of outdoor learning. Participants described through

writing and in discussion how the course informed their current pedagogical practices (for in-service teachers) and their anticipated future practices (for preservice teachers). They identified course readings—particularly case studies offering rich descriptions of outdoor learning in practice—as especially impactful. Course assignments were described as practical and focused on the development of place-based outdoor learning lessons, with explicit attention to learners’ cultural and environmental contexts. Finally, participants in both cohorts expressed appreciation for the breadth of course topics related to outdoor learning, especially those addressing alignment with standards, accessibility for all learners, and practical considerations such as safety and weather.

Author 4, Michelle Conley, was one of the in-service teachers who completed the course in Fall 2025 and describes several key takeaways from her experience:

As a teacher in the graduate program, I especially benefited from the portions of the course during which we conducted onsite visits to four elementary schools with outdoor classrooms. These visits allowed me to see opportunities for place-based outdoor education in its various forms and helped me imagine how similar approaches could work in my own context.

I teach at a rural school in the middle of the mountains, where students arrive by bus or car because there are no surrounding neighborhoods or sidewalks. Due to our school’s remote location, our students are more familiar with and connected to the outdoors than many of their urban peers. However, intentional outdoor learning time engages them with the environment in ways that differ from outdoor play at home, helping them interact with nature more purposefully.

Several key aspects of this graduate class stood out to me. One was learning how to conduct an onsite risk assessment. Completing a risk assessment at my school encouraged me to view everyday spaces with new eyes and identify new teaching opportunities. For example, I was surprised to discover that our school had installed an electronic wire fence around the dumpster to keep bears away. This process helped me think more intentionally about safety while also expanding my vision for outdoor instruction.

As a result, I expanded my capacity to use the outdoor learning classroom at my school. This space includes a pond with a waterfall, where I had my students notice interactions among Earth’s four spheres, observe wildlife life cycles, reflect on seasonal changes in their “sit spots,” and identify the purposes of variation in plant materials. I firmly believe that time in nature to practice observational skills is a much-needed experience in today’s technological age.

I also incorporated outdoor learning into other spaces on campus. In my school’s inner courtyard, students searched for natural examples of erosion and created models of mountains with and without trees and rocks to demonstrate how erosion can be minimized. They built homes from natural materials designed to withstand various natural hazards, and I had fun using a leaf blower to test their structural modifications against tornado-like winds.

Beyond individual lessons, the graduate course fostered collaboration with like-minded teachers across the rural-serving district, which fueled creativity and confidence in trying new

approaches. Learning about the benefits of outdoor learning helped me persevere as an educator as we extended our classroom beyond four concrete walls. By planning and implementing outdoor lessons, we created positive, lifelong memories for students who became more connected to nature, each other, and the world around them.

Michelle's narrative highlights how place-based outdoor learning can deepen instructional practice while drawing on the existing strengths of rural contexts. Her reflections illustrate how intentional engagement with local environments supports teacher learning that is both practical and responsive to community assets. Michelle's experience reinforces the value of university-school district partnerships that honor rural places as powerful sites for professional growth and student learning.

Considerations and Implications

There are several key considerations and implications from utilizing the student-driven inquiry project as a vehicle for engaging preservice teachers in rural spaces, including stakeholder collaboration, relevant curriculum, and professional development. As we saw, actively leveraging local partnerships ensured responsiveness to community needs while simultaneously fostering relationships grounded in trust and mutual respect. Collaboration between local educators, school leaders, community members, and preservice teachers also enriched the overall educational experiences and made funding and resource support seamless. By aligning teacher education with the needs of rural schools, initiatives like this can better prepare preservice teachers and strengthen the relationships between universities and rural communities. We also see a sense of shared responsibility for the education of students when multiple partners are brought together to collaborate on rural educational initiatives. This project leveraged the closeness of rural communities as an asset for extending supportive partnerships, leading towards more innovative and impactful educational practices (see Hartman et al., 2017).

In the student-driven inquiry project, the curriculum became central and deeply relevant. Too often, teacher education programs are designed in isolation from the communities they intend to serve, resulting in coursework that may not fully reflect the needs or priorities of local stakeholders (Ferguson et al., 2024). In response, the courses were intentionally designed to reflect the rural community context by integrating local resources and place-based knowledge, thereby enhancing student engagement and learning outcomes. Most impactful, the student-driven inquiry projects provided opportunity for real-time highlights of the strengths and resources inherent in rural settings rather than focusing solely on deficits. Centering rural-centered pedagogies such as place-based education creates more relevant and engaging learning experiences for students in a way that connects classrooms and communities. Empowering preservice teachers through autonomy and involvement in student-driven learning can build a generation of educators who are not only advocates for rural education and community interests but have confidence to develop curricula that are responsive to local needs. This approach by Clemson University can serve as a blueprint

for other universities seeking to engage with rural communities and increase the relevance of teacher education programs.

Finally, the student-driven inquiry projects enhanced professional development opportunities for both preservice and in-service teachers focusing on outdoor learning and place-based pedagogies. If we want teachers to be equipped with the necessary tools and experience to be successful in rural classrooms, we need to be thoughtful about ongoing educational experiences that are rooted in theoretical and practical approaches (Yin, 2019). As such, the initiatives described here included a variety of learner-centered practices designed to enhance educator pedagogical strategies specific to their rural setting. We know that educator preparation can be more effective when it is grounded in specific contexts (Hudson & Hudson, 2008), and this initiative was uniquely situated within the local rural community. Preparing new teachers to teach in rural settings requires a unique approach (Barley & Brigham, 2008), and we contend that this is also true for professional development of in-service teachers. Considering both the distinct needs, challenges, and assets of rural students and their communities should cause us to rethink the professional development of rural educators. This student-led inquiry project highlights one innovative approach through which to engage multiple educational partners in a rural locale through a powerful teacher learning experience.

Concluding Thoughts

This article described an innovative approach to designing rural educator learning opportunities through a student-driven inquiry situated within a university-school district partnership. Grounded in rural education scholarship and place-based theory, the project centered preservice teachers as co-designers while positioning in-service teachers and community members as vital sources of expertise. The narratives shared by Reagan and Michelle provide meaningful insight into the personal and professional impact of this work, highlighting how collaborative inquiry can deepen learning and relevance across roles.

Rooted in asset-based, culturally responsive commitments, this initiative demonstrates the potential of rural partnerships to leverage community strengths rather than focus on deficits. By drawing on the rural cultural wealth of the School District of Pickens County and the longstanding relationship with Clemson University, the resulting courses were intentionally responsive to local needs and meaningful for both preservice and in-service teachers. This work underscores the promise of reimagining how universities engage with rural districts by moving toward models that are collaborative, place-conscious, and mutually sustaining. At the same time, it offers a replicable example for rural-serving teacher education programs seeking to strengthen preparation through partnership and place.

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About the Authors

Steph N. Dean, Ph.D., is an assistant professor of science education in the Department of Teaching & Learning at Clemson University. Steph uses qualitative methods to understand what it is like to teach, learn, and play within natural or built environments. With over 11 years of experience as a K-8 educator, she is highly interested in how nature-based learning can be integrated into state standards in public-school settings.

Kristen Cuthrell, Ed.D., is chair of the Department of Education and Human Development, and interim chair for the Department of Teaching & Learning and a Dean's Fellow of Rural Education and Outreach in the College of Education at Clemson University. Her work focuses on rural education research-practice partnerships, rural cultural wealth, and asset-based community development, with an emphasis on amplifying rural voices and assets. Over the last 20 years, Kristen collaborated in approximately \$30 million externally funded research and outreach focused on improving and growing community partnerships in rural areas and currently serves as director of the University Council for Educational Administration (UCEA) Center for Innovative Rural Collaborative Leadership Education (CIRCLE).

Reagan Nohrenberg, B.S.Ed., graduated from Clemson University in the summer of 2026 with a bachelor's degree in Elementary Education and a minor in Parks and Protected Area Management. She is passionate about educating and inspiring young learners, creating meaningful connections that foster confidence, curiosity, and strong character. Reagan values providing positive learning experiences and helping students develop meaningful connections with the natural world. She is especially interested in creating engaging educational experiences that integrate nature-based learning while supporting children's academic, social, and emotional growth.

Michelle Conley, M.Ed., is an elementary educator with 26 years of experience teaching every grade level from kindergarten through fifth grade. Her passion is developing lifelong learners by fostering curiosity and a love of learning through hands-on experiences. Michelle regularly extends learning beyond the classroom by taking students on nature walks, incorporating outdoor learning spaces into instruction, and guiding them through hands-on gardening experiences in the school's raised-bed garden.

Advancing Rural Student Mental Health Through a University-School Partnership: A Professional Development Schools Approach

Lucy Purgason, *Oregon State University-Cascades*

Molly Moran, *Oregon State University-Cascades*

Lauren Haas, *Redmond School District, Oregon*

Susan Horn, *Oregon State University-Cascades*

Kayla Mumm, *Oregon State University-Cascades*

Angie Chown, *Oregon State University-Cascades*

Rural youth face significant mental health disparities due to geographic isolation, provider shortages, and stigma. Schools often serve as the primary access point for care, yet rural districts struggle to recruit qualified school counselors. This article introduces the School Counseling Professional Partnership, a university–school collaboration grounded in the evidence-based Professional Development Schools (PDS) approach. Through a school-based practicum, graduate school counseling students deliver tiered mental health supports under live supervision, enhancing school-based mental health services while gaining rural-context expertise. Outcomes demonstrate increased student access, reduced counselor to student ratios, and strengthened counselor preparation. This replicable model addresses critical gaps in rural mental health care.

Keywords: Mental health, rural, Professional Development School, school counselor preparation

Youth mental health concerns are increasing (World Health Organization, 2023). Recent prevalence estimates show that over one in 10 youth aged five to twenty-four live with at least one mental health diagnosis, with anxiety most prevalent among children ages five to nine and depression among youth ages 15-24 (Kieling et al., 2024). These needs are exacerbated by persistent barriers to accessing mental health care, especially youth experiencing marginalization due to race, ethnicity, social economic status, and language (Sapiro & Ward, 2020). When left unaddressed, early mental health challenges can lead to long-term adverse outcomes across health, economic, and educational domains (McGorry et al., 2025).

These challenges are especially pronounced in rural communities, where geographic isolation, fewer resources, and stigma contribute to significant disparities in mental health access (Graves et al., 2024). Suicide rates among rural youth are 1.6-1.8 times higher than those of their urban peers (Hoffman et al. 2022). Despite the need for mental health prevention and intervention services, rural areas are frequently designated as mental health professional shortage areas (Health Resources and Services Administration, 2025). With counselor availability in rural areas at two-thirds that of urban settings (Andrilla et al., 2022), schools often serve as the sole source of mental health support for students (Duong et al., 2021). The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) notes that in rural schools, the school counselor may be the only provider of mental health support in these professional shortage areas (2025a), making the strengthening of school-based mental health capacity a critical strategy for improving access.

Unfortunately, rural schools often struggle to recruit and retain qualified school counselors, with some positions remaining vacant for years. To address urgent shortages, particularly in rural areas, some state education departments hire school counselors under emergency licenses, waiving the requirement for prior completion of a graduate training program (Harman & Ausloos, 2024). Although this can help alleviate vacancies, it also creates challenges in preparing emergency credentialed school counselors to meet complex K-12 student needs, particularly those involving mental health. For example, emergency credentialed school counselors report requiring training and support in conducting suicide risk assessments, developing and delivering classroom curriculum lessons, and accessing community resources (Harman & Ausloos, 2024).

To address this gap, it is essential to establish a school counselor pipeline of highly trained and qualified school counselors prepared to meet the mental health needs of students in rural schools (Harman & Ausloos, 2024; Kearney et al., 2025). University–school district partnerships offer a promising avenue for building this capacity (Boulden & Schimmel, 2022; Lawson & Owens, 2024). This manuscript introduces an innovative application of the Professional Development Schools (PDS) approach, the School Counseling Professional Partnership, designed to train school counseling graduate students in rural school settings. The approach aims to enhance mental health service delivery in rural schools while equipping future school counselors with the essential skills and contextual knowledge necessary for effective rural practice.

Literature Review

Professional Development Schools

The evidence-based PDS approach has existed for over four decades, originating in the 1980s with teacher preparation programs (National Association for Professional Development Schools [NAPDS], 2021). The PDS is a distinctive form of university-school partnership, intentionally structured around nine essential elements that define the approach including clinical practice preparation, on-going professional learning, and resource sharing (NAPDS, 2021). Unlike a one-time collaboration or single trainee placement, the PDS is a sustained, co-developed partnership between a university training program and a school,

designed to provide mutual benefit to both institutions. A hallmark of the PDS is the creation of an innovative “third space,” where the intersecting influences of school and university foster in-depth educational experiences (NAPDS, 2021, p. 10).

This partnership supports ongoing professional development for both school personnel and university faculty, while strengthening connections among school staff and trainees. The PDS offers university students insight into school environments and their broader contexts, preparing them to understand the complex factors shaping K-12 learners. Together, school partners and university faculty identify needs, maximize shared strengths, and coordinate resources to address challenges. The PDS extends beyond traditional institutional boundaries through cross-site engagement. Faculty work alongside trainees in school settings, providing live, in vivo supervision and instruction. School-based partners actively contribute to the evolution of the PDS, collaborating with faculty to adapt the approach to emerging needs and contextual changes (NAPDS, 2021).

Professional Development Schools and School Counselor Training

While traditional PDS approaches primarily cater to teacher education programs, and teachers in training, the skills gained from a PDS experience such as learning to navigate the complexity of the school environment, cross discipline collaboration, and functioning as leaders are also extremely relevant for school counselors in training. Prior to the early 2000s many counselor education programs lacked opportunities for school counseling students to gain and practice these skills before entering their internship experience, leaving them feeling underprepared to engage in a complex school environment (Coker & Schrader, 2004). In the early 2000s, to bridge the gap between knowledge and practice, school counseling scholars began exploring the application of a PDS approach to school counselor training for both practicum and internship placements in rural and urban settings. Practice-based examples within school counseling scholarship include school counseling program-specific implementations (Coker & Schrader, 2004; Foust & Goslee, 2014), impact of a PDS on counseling skill development (Cuccaro & Casey, 2007), and the role of a PDS in preparing trainees for systems-based and advocacy work (Cook et al., 2016). Quantitative research indicates that trainees prefer the PDS practicum approach over traditional placements, typically involving one trainee at a single school site (Cuccaro & Casey, 2007). Qualitative findings highlight opportunities for multi-perspective taking, critical self-reflection, and engagement in social justice advocacy during PDS-based practicums (Cook et al., 2016).

Historically, the PDS has been employed to respond to urgent professional needs arising from policy changes or contextual shifts (Coker & Schrader, 2004; Cook et al., 2016). For example, when the ASCA National Model was introduced to guide comprehensive school counseling programs, PDS partnerships facilitated implementation by supporting practicing school counselors and providing training sites for students (Coker & Schrader, 2004). PDS has been used to advance multicultural and social justice counseling competencies; under the on-site supervision of a counselor education faculty member, school counseling practicum students increased their counseling skills and commitment to systemic advocacy

(Cook et al., 2016). In today's context of escalating mental health needs, particularly in rural areas, the PDS offers a promising approach to meet this challenge.

Meeting Rural Student Mental Health Needs Through a PDS

Amidst rising youth mental health needs, students in rural areas face distinct challenges in accessing care (Kearney et al., 2025; Smith Ramey et al., 2023). A recent qualitative study in rural eastern Washington identified barriers such as stigma, limited mental health access, and a shortage of qualified mental health professionals (Graves et al., 2024). These gaps position schools as key access points for support; however, some concern exists that school counselors may lack the specialized training and capacity needed to address acute mental health issues (Graves et al., 2024). These concerns are especially pressing in elementary schools, where rural counselors often serve large caseloads and may be the only mental health professional in the building (Brown et al., 2022; Purgason & Gruman, 2024). For example, in the state in which the partnership takes place student-to-counselor ratios are well above the recommended ASCA 250:1 (U.S. Department of Education, 2024). Meeting the complex needs of younger students requires targeted training and support for school-based providers. Strengthening the pipeline of professionals equipped to work in rural schools, and fostering partnerships between universities and districts, can help train individuals from rural communities, maximizing their local knowledge and trust to improve access and outcomes.

School counselor preparation programs include training in mental health prevention and intervention within the framework of comprehensive school counseling programs. This includes instruction on mental health screening (Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs, 2023) and evidence-based counseling approaches appropriate for a school setting (ASCA, n.d.). A multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS) guides service delivery, emphasizing data-informed decision making to identify and address student needs (Goodman-Scott et al., 2019; Zyromski et al., 2021). MTSS is structured into three tiers. Tier 1 supports provide universal interventions, such as classroom lessons on social emotional learning. A recent large meta-analysis suggested that students who participated in SEL interventions experienced improved outcomes across a variety of domains ranging from improved attitudes and relationships to an increase in sense of safety, and improved school climate (Cipriano et al., 2023). Tier 2 interventions offer targeted small-group counseling for students needing additional supports across a broad range of topics such as emotion regulation, confidence building, and social skills. Research suggest that group counseling can reduce negative emotions and increase a sense of belonging (ASCA, 2020). Tier 3 interventions include individualized counseling, crisis response, and referral for more intensive support (Kearney et al., 2025).

Rural School Setting Considerations for Implementation

Implementing MTSS in rural schools requires school counselor attention to both context-specific challenges and community strengths (Henry & Fears; 2025; Kearney et al., 2025). Rural schools are situated in interconnected school, family, and community contexts (Henry & Fears, 2025). The Rural Cultural Wealth framework identifies four types of assets in rural communities: rural ingenuity, rural resourcefulness, rural familism, and rural community unity (Crumb et al., 2023). These forms of rural wealth encompass the ways that rural residents collectively share resources, solve problems, and support one another and the larger community (Crumb et al., 2023). A PDS approach can actualize these assets by strengthening a school's capacity to deliver supports and activating the knowledge and relational capital that school partners contribute to PDS development, while honoring the mutual benefits of the partnership (Biddle, 2025; Crumb et al., 2023). Through a PDS approach, school counselor trainees can be introduced to mental health interventions early in their training, while developing awareness of the unique ecological factors influencing service delivery in rural settings.

School Counseling Professional Partnership

The School Counseling Professional Partnership presented in this program description is a 12-year collaboration between one rural, high need elementary school and a nationally accredited graduate school counseling program at an urban university in the Pacific Northwest. This partnership mirrors a traditional PDS approach where a group of six school counseling graduate students complete a 22-week field practicum placement at the same school site across two, 11-week academic terms. Throughout the 22 weeks, practicum students implement various components of a comprehensive school counseling program under the supervision of a licensed school counselor and an on-site faculty supervisor one day per week. The training and preparation of the practicum students and a detailed description of the partnership are provided below.

Partnership Elementary District

The School Counseling Professional Partnership school district is in a growing rural community in the Pacific Northwest. This area meets both the state's definition of rurality (State Office of Rural Health, 2024) and the federal classification of "rural fringe" (National Center for Education Statistics, 2025). The local school district enrolls nearly 7,000 students across 13 schools (State Department of Education, 2024). Student demographics reflect the region's agricultural heritage and recent population growth: 70% identify as White, 22% as Hispanic or Latino, 5% as multiracial, with smaller percentages identifying as American Indian/Alaska Native, Asian, Black/African American, and Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander populations (State Department of Education, 2024). The district also serves a diverse student population, including 13% identified as Multilingual Learners (speaking 26 languages), 14% as students with disabilities, and 32% experiencing poverty (State Department of Education, 2024).

The region surrounding the partnership community has been identified as an area with below-average mental health provider capacity compared to state benchmarks. There are approximately 0.65 mental health providers per 1,000 residents compared to the state average of 1.25 providers per 1,000 residents, revealing a significant gap in accessible mental health care within this community (State Office of Rural Health, 2021). For many students and families, school represents the primary, and sometimes only, point of contact with mental health services. At the same time, a shortage of school counselors exists in rural schools across the region, requiring intentional effort to build a pipeline of well-trained, culturally competent school counseling professionals.

Partnership Elementary School

The partner elementary school serves approximately 480 students in kindergarten through fifth grade (State Department of Education, 2024). The student population is predominantly White (75%), with 16% identifying as Hispanic or Latino, 8% as multiracial, and smaller percentages identifying as American Indian/Alaska Native, Asian, Black/African American, and Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander populations (State Department of Education, 2024). Although only about 5% of students are classified as Multilingual learners, three languages are represented within the school community (State Department of Education, 2024). Additionally, 16% of students have identified disabilities, and 33% of students are experiencing poverty (State Department of Education, 2024). The school maintains an average class size of 26 students and employs 27 teachers, 11 educational assistants, and one school counselor (State Department of Education, 2024).

Selection of the partner school site was guided by several key factors: the strength of the current school counseling program, the expertise of the school counselor, and administrative support. The school counselor brings over a decade of experience and a deep commitment to comprehensive school counseling, culminating in earning distinction as a Recognized ASCA Model Program (ASCA, 2025b). Her experience in rural education and ability to mentor trainees across all components of a comprehensive school counseling program created an ideal training environment. Additionally, both school and district leaders demonstrated strong buy-in, recognizing the partnership's mutual benefits: expanded counseling services for students and a high-quality, rural-context training for future school counselors. The collaboration immediately enhanced student support while fostering essential competencies for trainees working in rural settings.

University Practicum Student Preparation

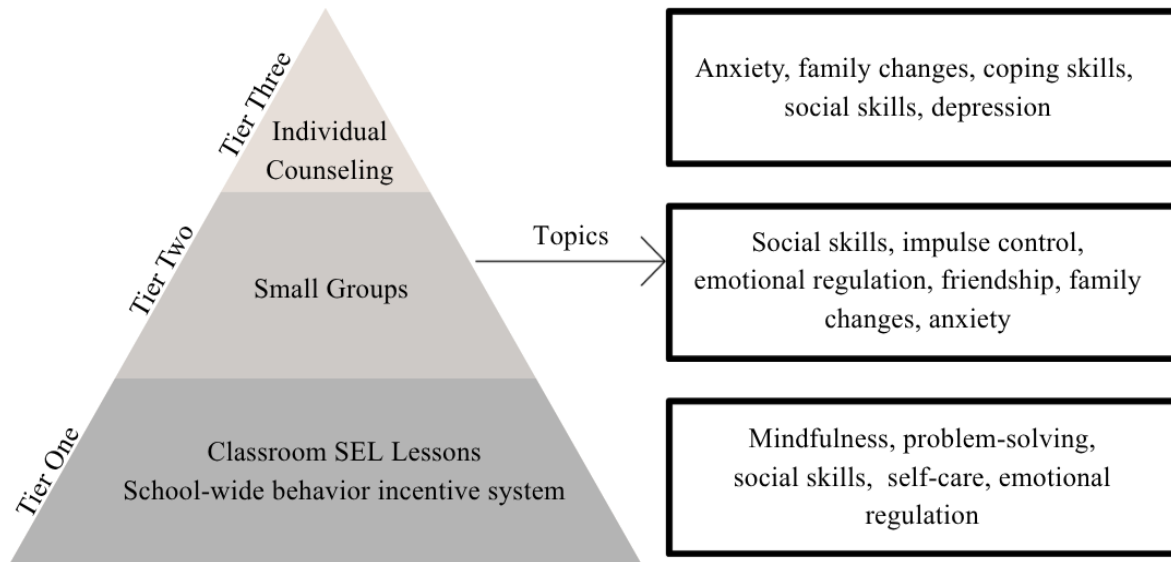
Counselor training programs may rarely address the unique needs of rural communities and thus, counselors are often underprepared to provide relevant and responsive mental health services to rural clients and students (Fifield & Oliver, 2016). Considering the significant mental health needs and lack of resources in rural areas, it is essential that counselor training programs prepare students to work in rural settings. The graduate school counseling students who participate in the professional partnership complete

a two- or three-year 90-credit program leading to a master's in counseling degree and a preliminary state school counseling license. Before beginning practicum, students complete several rigorous content courses that prepare them to deliver culturally responsive programming to meet the mental health needs of K-5 students in rural settings.

For example, during their first term in the graduate program, students complete an intensive summer session that includes an ethics course, a leadership in school counseling course, and social cultural perspectives course, all of which integrate material on the rural context. In the school counseling leadership course, students analyze data sets to identify and prioritize needs utilizing a multitiered system of supports. The ethics course features practicing school counselors from surrounding rural districts as guest lecturers, offering valuable insights drawn from their work within rural communities. Community Cultural Wealth (Yosso, 2005) is introduced in the social cultural perspectives course with an emphasis on Rural Cultural Wealth (Crumb et al., 2023). During fall term students complete several skills-based courses where they learn and practice culturally responsive, trauma informed counseling skills. Before beginning their practicum experience, the students spend 12 hours observing in classrooms at the partnership school practicum site. During these observations students meet teachers, connect with the school counselor, and develop an understanding of the community and cultural norms of the school. Students also complete the Applied Suicide Intervention Skills Training and an in-depth counseling theories course exploring various modalities and approaches to support individuals with mental health challenges.

School Counseling Professional Partnership Description

Practicum students participating in the School Counseling Professional Partnership deliver direct services across MTSS under the supervision of faculty with extensive experience working in rural areas. Practicum students receive applied culturally responsive training while increasing mental health supports for rural students within the partnership school.

Figure 1*Practicum Student Directed Services***Tiered Delivery Approach**

At the Tier 1 level, practicum students deliver classroom social-emotional learning (SEL) lessons assigned by the on-site school counselor. The lesson topics and Tier 1 programming are informed by school-wide data including school report cards, student survey data, and referrals. The identified topics include mindfulness, problem-solving, social skills, and emotional regulation. The evidence-based SEL curricula implemented are approved by the district and align with ASCA Student Standards (2025c). The delivery of SEL lessons at the Tier 1 level is an upstream preventive approach that proactively addresses common student challenges before they escalate to the point of requiring Tier 2 or Tier 3 interventions. By intervening early, schools can reduce the intensity and frequency of higher-level mental health needs.

At the Tier 2 level, practicum students facilitate eight-week psychoeducation groups for students who need additional supports beyond what is provided in classroom lessons. Group topics include anxiety, social skills, emotion regulation, and family changes. Practicum students utilize evidence-based curricula that align with the ASCA Student Standards related to the identified need. These small groups are organized by grade level, and practicum students are intentionally assigned to both younger and older grades to further develop group facilitation skills across a range of developmental levels. The practicum students evaluate the appropriate level of support for each group member at the conclusion of the term through pre- and post-survey data and examine outcomes through achievement, attendance, and behavior data. These small groups provide targeted mental health services for multiple students while simultaneously reducing stigma by embedding support within peer interactions.

At the Tier 3 level, each practicum student provides individual brief counseling for two elementary students weekly. These students are identified through referrals given to the on-site school counselor. The practicum student, in conjunction with the on-site school counselor, makes phone contact with parents and/or guardians to obtain informed consent, build rapport, and get a better sense of student needs. This is especially important in the rural context as it presents an opportunity to further educate families on the services provided and create a stronger partnership. At the end of each 11-week term, practicum students reassess individual student needs to determine next steps: continuing counseling, adding or transitioning to a Tier 2 counseling group, or referring to community resources. Within this structure, practicum students learn to collaborate closely with the on-site school counselor and teachers to ensure continuity of care, thereby preventing gaps in treatment and strengthening the overall support network for students within the rural school setting.

Practicum Student Faculty Supervision

Culturally responsive supervision is an integral part of the Professional School Counseling Partnership. Faculty supervisors with experience working in rural schools who are familiar with the specific mental health needs and community resources are intentionally selected to provide on-site supervision. Connecting practicum students with regional and district resources, as well as other mental health professionals, helps them establish networks and gain a deeper understanding of how to effectively serve rural school communities. Student practicum placement at a shared site enables peer supervision, context specific consultation, and collective problem solving. Practicum students can provide one another relevant feedback, as they each understand the school context. This structure also offers essential professional support, as school counselors in rural settings, particularly at the elementary level, often experience professional isolation.

School Counseling Professional Partnership Outcomes

Through the School Counseling Professional Partnership both practicum students and the elementary school community experience tangible benefits that extend beyond traditional field placement outcomes. The partnership helps fill critical service gaps and ensures that students' social, emotional, and mental health needs are timely and equitably met. Partnership outcomes are collected through a variety of sources including narrative feedback from partnership participants (i.e., school staff and practicum school counseling students), practicum course evaluations, number of tiered mental health counseling interventions delivered, number of K-5 elementary students served, and hiring and job placement trends of school counseling graduates. For descriptive purposes, selected representative outcome data is included below.

Narrative Feedback

Partnership school staff and practicum school counseling students both indicate that the School Counseling Professional Partnership has brought benefits to the entire school, including professional development to school staff and positive impacts on student well-being. For example, one school staff member shared:

As a teacher, I've seen firsthand how the practicum partnership has benefited our students and school community. Having counseling [practicum students] available has made it easier for students to access support, manage emotions, and build stronger relationships. The [practicum students] bring a calm, caring presence that positively impacts the classroom environment. It's also inspiring to see them gaining real-world experience that prepares them to make a difference in rural schools like ours.

The school principal noted the knowledge that school counseling practicum students contributed to school staff in understanding student mental health. She shared, "the [partnership] allows counseling [practicum students] to form genuine connections with our students. Through their time on site, they deepen our understanding of students' social and emotional needs—strengthening our collective ability to provide the care and support every child deserves."

Practicum student feedback indicates that participation in the School Counseling Professional Partnership provides unique learning experiences that equip them with counseling skills to support their effectiveness in interning and/or working in a rural school in the future. One student noted the benefits of having peers and a faculty member on site to provide in-vivo processing of experiences and to deepen reflective learning. They shared:

What made practicum so meaningful for me was having my cohort and supervisor to debrief these experiences with. Whether I was troubleshooting a challenging classroom lesson, receiving feedback about how I might refine my group facilitation techniques, or sharing ideas about strategies to use when working one-on-one with students' individual needs, the collaborative reflection process helped me improve.

Another practicum student expressed the impact this had on their professional identity. She noted:

As someone who grew up in a rural community and attended a rural school without access to school counselors at the elementary level, it was deeply meaningful to contribute to a comprehensive school counseling program that prioritizes social-emotional learning (SEL) at every level.... I believe this experience helped shape me into a stronger advocate for students, connecting my personal experience as a student in rural education with my emerging professional identity as a school counselor.

The learning benefits to the practicum school counseling students were also noted by a partnership faculty supervisor. This supervisor, a decades long rural school counselor, and part-time faculty member of the counseling program, highlighted the unique school counselor preparation the School Counseling Professional Partnership offers:

This establishes early in the career of a school counselor the importance of collaboration, networking, and feedback that will allow them to develop the professional partnerships needed, when at so many times, the school counseling profession can be a “lone ranger” role in the schools especially in less populous areas. These students see first-hand how the entire school community works together in this rural setting to support the development of solid mental health and wellness tools for the students they serve.

Mental Health Intervention Data

This School Counseling Professional Partnership helps address the ongoing shortage of mental health providers in the region by expanding access to preventive and responsive care within the school setting. For example, counseling waitlists can be months long, or when counselors are available, transportation barriers prevent families from accessing services. Over the course of the 22-week practicum during the 2024-2025 academic year, the six practicum students collectively served 485 students through Tier 1 classroom lessons, led 24 Tier 2 small groups serving 120 students, and met with 20 students for Tier 3 individual counseling. By having practicum students contribute to school counseling services, the partnership school lowered their student-to-counselor ratio, creating capacity for deeper student relationships, increased responsive interventions, and proactive support to a larger number of students.

The six practicum students collaborated with all teachers, the parents and guardians of their Tier 3 students, the on-site school counselor, and select administrative staff and educational assistants. These interactions provided practicum students with insight into rural school systems while fostering support and connection with school personnel. Through these relationships, practicum students practiced consultation and collaboration skills, core components of the ASCA National Model.

With the intent to create a rural school counselor pipeline, graduation placement data from the last cohort of students completing the School Counseling Professional Partnership indicates that approximately 67% took a post-graduate employment position as a school counselor in a rural school. This speaks to the model's intentionality in investing in supervision and coursework aligned with serving rural populations. Although not all graduates from the graduate school counseling program ultimately work in rural schools, the skills and perspectives developed through the school counseling professional partnership model remain highly applicable. Many urban primary schools in the region serve students and families from rural communities, and having school counselors with an understanding of rural contexts enhances their ability to provide equitable, community-informed support in any educational environment.

Discussion

While this practicum model demonstrates clear benefits, it also presents challenges inherent to implementing comprehensive mental health support in rural settings. These challenges provide valuable insight for refining the practicum experience and sustaining future partnerships. The university is in an urban setting, thus accessing the partner elementary school may be a barrier for some graduate students who live closer to the university or are coming from other surrounding rural areas. Travel to the partner school requires graduate students to have reliable transportation, whereas other models may allow graduate students to complete their practicum in a school that is more geographically accessible. To ensure quality and sustainability several important considerations should be noted. Partnering directly with the school district or the regional education service district to secure funding dedicated to travel stipends for practicum students would increase equity and remove potential barriers to participation. The university might also consider delivering course content directly at the practicum school site to further reduce the travel demand on students. Offering coursework directly at the practicum site could also serve as an opportunity to invite school staff to participate in learning opportunities, offering their expertise while also learning more about school counseling.

Financial and logistical barriers can also pose challenges for some graduate students. Graduate training is inherently costly, and the practicum experience is unpaid, which may limit accessibility for students with financial constraints and those who need to work full time. Because the practicum model requires attendance at the partnership school on a designated day each week, students may face difficulties balancing their practicum responsibilities with employment, childcare, or other personal obligations. More traditional models may allow graduate students to select a location and day of the week that works best for them and their schedule and outside responsibilities. These factors can create additional stressors that influence graduate students' overall experience and capacity to fully engage in the practicum experience. The School Counseling Professional Partnership is situated within an in-person counseling program. Counselor education programs interested in adopting this approach that are geographically further from rural areas and/or offered online may consider ways they could adapt to fit the unique contextual needs of their programs. Future research is needed to move beyond descriptive outcomes to assess the program's impact on school counselor training and student mental health support.

Conclusion

The School Counseling Professional Partnership is a promising approach to address several important challenges and barriers faced by rural school communities. This approach prepares future school counselors to better serve students and families in rural schools by providing contextual learning opportunities in the rural setting. This replicable model creates a pipeline of qualified school counselors who are prepared to deliver culturally responsive mental health supports where shortages likely exist.

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About the Authors

Lucy Purgason, PhD, LSC is an associate professor of Counseling at Oregon State University-Cascades. She is a licensed school counselor, working for five years in rural, Title I schools and a school specifically for newcomer immigrant and refugee students. Her research centers on culturally responsive school counseling practices, interprofessional collaboration, and the academic and mental health needs of multilingual and immigrant-origin students. Her work is deeply rooted in community engagement, with a focus on building sustainable university-school partnerships that remove rural access barriers in K-12 education.

Molly Moran, PhD, LPC is an assistant clinical professor and school counseling program lead at Oregon State University. Dr. Moran has worked in k-12 schools for over 20 years. Her scholarship centers on school-based interventions aimed at improving outcomes for historically marginalized students and counselor education pedagogy. Dr. Moran grounds her scholarship in a collaborative, culturally responsive, and context-driven approach that elevates community strengths and expertise.

Lauren Haas, M.A., NCC, is an elementary school counselor at a Title I dual language school in Redmond, Oregon. She earned her Master's in Counseling from Oregon State University–Cascades and is a National Certified Counselor. Lauren's work centers on culturally responsive practices that uplift underrepresented and newcomer students. She is passionate about creating inclusive, trauma-informed spaces where every child feels seen, supported, and capable of success.

Susan Horn is a graduate student in the Master of Counseling program at Oregon State University-Cascades with a focus in School Counseling. She earned her Bachelor of Science in Psychology from Oregon State University. Susan currently serves as president of the OSU-Cascades chapter of Chi Sigma Iota, an international counseling honor society, where she focuses on professional development, advocacy, mentorship, and counselor education within the campus and broader community.

Kayla Mumm is a graduate student in the Master of Counseling program at Oregon State University-Cascades with a focus in School Counseling. She obtained her Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) at the University of Tennessee in 2019. Kayla's professional experiences include community resource work in rural Central Oregon and supporting students in Title I K-12 schools in both rural and urban contexts.

Angie Chown, M.S, LSC has served as a school counselor since 2012. She earned a B.A. in Psychology from Pacific University and an M.S. in School Counseling from Oregon State University–Cascades, where she also teaches part-time. Angie is a longtime partner to the OSU-Cascades Master of Counseling program, mentoring practicum students and interns. She was named Oregon School Counselor of the Year in 2023 and currently serves on the Oregon School Counselor Association Board of Directors.

School Counseling Integrated Program (SCIP): Preparing School Counselors in Training to Collaborate with School Nurses and ESOL Teachers in Rural Alabama Schools

Malti Tuttle, *Auburn University*

Morgan Yordy, *Auburn University*

Jamie Harrison, *Auburn University*

Chih-hsuan Wang, *Auburn University*

Lyndsay Deal, *Creighton University*

John McCall, *Auburn University*

The School Counseling Integrated Program (SCIP) was funded by United States Department of Education under the Mental Health Service Professional (MHSP) Demonstration Grant Program. The aim of SCIP was to increase mental health services in rural Alabama schools by training school counseling students to collaborate with school counselors, school nurses, and ESOL teachers. SCIP demonstrates interdisciplinary and cross-disciplinary collaboration. The purpose of this research study was to discuss the empirical findings from a program evaluation after year one. The current study focused on eight SCIP Fellows' knowledge, attitudes, and perceptions in implementation of an integrated collaboration between these professional roles to address student mental health concerns while practicing within their ethical boundaries and scope of practice. Findings from the program evaluation revealed a statistically significant enhancement in students' knowledge, attitudes, and perceptions concerning interdisciplinary collaboration with school counselors, school nurses, and ESOL educators.

Keywords: school counselors in training; interdisciplinary and cross-disciplinary collaboration; rural schools; school nurses, multilingual learners

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC, 2022), mental health concerns are growing for school age children and adolescents, with reports of one in three high school students having persistent thoughts of sadness and hopelessness, and one in six youth experiencing thoughts of suicide with a plan. Mental health emergency visits increased 24% for children ages 5-11 and 31% for 12-17 years (Abramson, 2022). This phenomenon is not exclusively prevalent in the United States. Globally, one in seven 10–19-year-olds experience mental health conditions (World Health Organization [WHO], 2022). Prevalent emotional disorders linked to school age children include ADHD, anxiety, behavior

problems, and depression (National Association of School Nurses [NASN], 2022; WHO, 2022). In addition, different factors such as the impact of COVID-19 on the mental health of students, current pedagogical practices such as antiracist school counseling (Mason et al., 2021; Mayes & Byrd, 2022), updates to the ASCA Ethical Standards (2022), the call for school counselor and school nurse collaboration (Mason et al., 2021; Tuttle et al., 2018), and school counselor and ESOL teacher collaboration (De Oliveira & Wachter Morris, 2015; Purgason et al., 2024; Tuttle et al., 2021; Tuttle et al., 2022) exemplify the vital need to prepare school counseling master's students for the profession and diverse student mental health needs.

The School Counseling Integrated Program (SCIP) was designed to expand mental health services in rural Alabama schools by fostering interdisciplinary collaboration among school counselors, school nurses, and English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) teachers. Funded by the U.S. Department of Education through the Mental Health Service Professional (MHSP) Demonstration Grant Program, SCIP aimed to support K–12 students by increasing the number of school counselors equipped with advanced training in mental health and interdisciplinary practices. The program specifically prepared master's-level school counseling students to engage in collaborative efforts across professional domains. These three disciplines were intentionally selected based on their complementary roles in promoting students' mental and physical health, as well as academic success (Purgason et al., 2024; Tuttle & Johnson, 2018; Tuttle et al., 2018). Integrated care is particularly critical for school counselors, whose work involves reducing barriers to healthcare access while addressing both medical and behavioral health needs within the school setting (Johnson et al., 2023a; Mancini et al., 2023).

This article presents first year program evaluation findings from the initial cohort that completed the SCIP program. SCIP Fellows were school counseling master's students who received training on the role of the school nurse and English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) teacher and how to collaborate with these school professionals to support K-12 students. SCIP Fellows were placed in rural high-needs schools in Alabama for their practicum and internship experiences and applied their training by collaborating with school nurses, ESOL teachers, community agencies, and key partners.

Training

SCIP training was incorporated into the educational setting through readings, lectures, assignments, and application to the practicum and internship experiences. School counseling, nursing, ESOL faculty, and a graduate assistant provided the training based on their specialty areas. SCIP Fellows further learned to implement data-informed practices to determine the types of services and interventions to provide (ASCA, 2019) by working in tandem with other disciplines to communicate student needs. SCIP Fellows received education about Social Determinants of Health (SDOH), which are the nonmedical, social factors that influence an individual's health (Johnson et al., 2023b; Kirkbride et al., 2024). These are grouped into five main categories including economic stability, education access and quality, healthcare access and quality, neighborhood and built environment, and social and community context (Johnson et

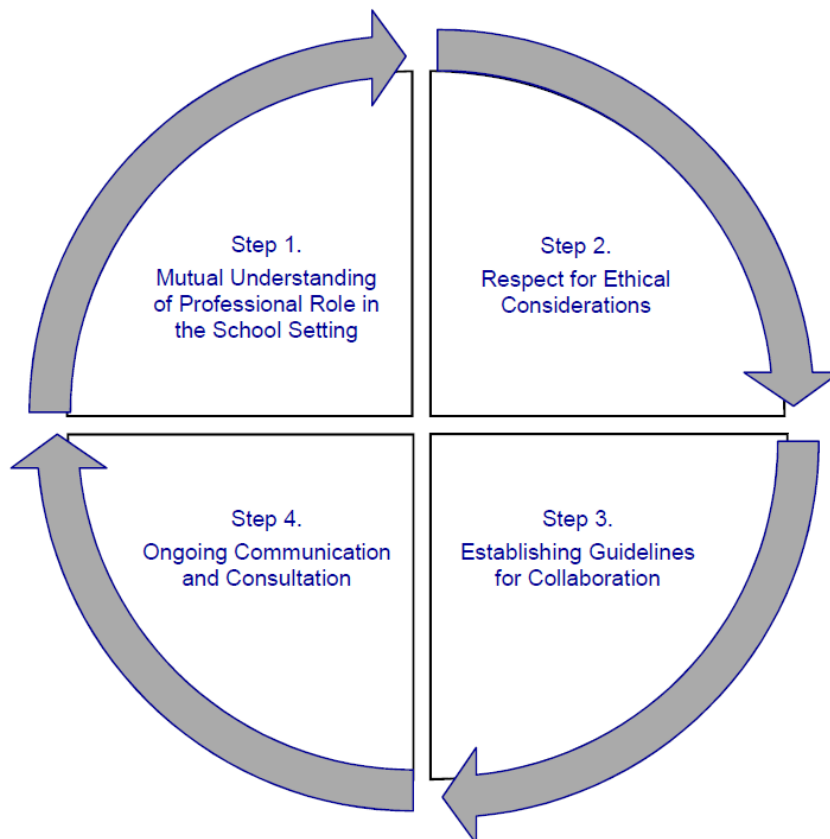
al., 2023b; Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion [ODPHP], n.d.). The focus on SDOH was to increase students' knowledge related to the social factors, driven by systems of inequality, which impact an individual's physical and psychological health and the school counselor's role in addressing the SDOH through collaboration, leadership, and advocacy in the K-12 school setting (ASCA, 2019; Johnson et al., 2023b; Mason et al., 2021). The incorporation of SDOH invited students to gain a framework for interdisciplinary collaboration with school nurses and ESOL teachers as it relates to improving mental health services in the K-12 school rural settings (Rural Health Information Hub, 2026).

School Counseling

Collaboration of school counselors, school nurses, and ESOL teachers as a vital integrated approach was intentionally included in the training. For example, The School Counselor and School Nurse Collaboration Model (Tuttle et al., 2018) served as a guiding framework and was particularly relevant when students presented with somatic symptoms or disengagement—common referral points for both professionals. Mason et al. (2021) expanded this model to include equity-focused pedagogical practices and the importance of incorporating diverse professional perspectives in mental health decision-making.

Figure 1

The Collaboration Model as a Four-Step Cycle.



School Nurse

College of Nursing faculty collaborated with the School Counseling Program coordinator to design an introductory session on school nursing. Given first-year school counseling students' limited exposure to the role of nurses in schools, a lecture-based format with integrated active learning was selected. The session introduced the history of public health nursing, nursing roles in schools, and educational pathways from LPN to Ph.D. Students explored legal responsibilities, such as medication administration, and engaged in group activities to examine collaboration between counselors and nurses. This approach aligns with prior training recommendations (Mason et al., 2021; Tuttle et al., 2018). During the second year, the focus was mental health and the collaboration between the school nurse and the school counselor. A large component of class discussion included mental health and studies surrounding mental health concerns from the perspectives of nurses. For example, many nurses report over 50% of their time spent working with children experiencing mental health challenges in schools yet there is a knowledge gap in understanding the needs of this population and a need to better identify students (Moen & Jacobsen, 2022). The class experience also utilized groups to focus on the mental health concerns of eating disorders, self-harm, substance use, and how nurses and counselors can work collaboratively in a school setting.

ESOL Teacher and Multilingual Learners of English

The ESOL Education portion of SCIP training focused on Multilingual Learners of English (MLE). The first lecture, part of the first-year Orientation to School Counseling course, is designed as a foundational introduction to MLEs in K-12 schools. Students learned about MLE populations in the United States and Alabama and experienced a language immersion lesson to better understand the challenges MLEs encounter in academic settings. Additionally, SCIP Fellows received training on English Learner (EL) demographics, legislation, and the role of ESOL teachers in assessment and language acquisition.

The second ESOL lecture is provided during the second-year course. This component addressed the mental health and academic challenges faced by ELs in rural schools and equipped SCIP Fellows to better support MLEs and their families (Sugarman & Lazarin, 2020). Students learned about the multiple labels they will encounter for these students and what they mean and received a broad overview of national and state legislation, court decisions, and policy along with school procedures for identification, placement, and assessment. Additional topics in this second lecture included trauma related to immigration and documentation status, and career-readiness advocacy issues for undocumented students.

Purpose of Research Inquiry

This article will discuss the empirical findings from a mixed-methods program evaluation approach. School counseling master's students received training and opportunities to collaborate with school nurses and ESOL teachers during their practicum and internship field experiences in rural high needs school settings in Alabama. The evaluation results focused on the SCIP Fellows' knowledge, attitudes, and perceptions in implementation of an integrated collaboration between these professional roles to address

student mental health concerns while practicing within their ethical boundaries and scope of practice. The following program evaluation questions framed this research:

1. Does SCIP program impact participating school counseling students' knowledge in integrative care to work with school nurses, ESOL teachers, and school counselors?
2. Does SCIP program impact participating school counseling students' attitudes in integrative care to work with school nurses, ESOL teachers, and school counselors?
3. What were school counselor students' perceptions toward the integrative care to work with school nurses, ESOL teachers, and school counselors?

Method

Kirkpatrick's (1959) four-level model, reaction, learning, behavior, and results influenced the evaluation plan. A pre-and-post survey of knowledge and attitudes items was administered. Focus group interviews were conducted at the end of the practicum and internship to understanding the SCIP Fellows' knowledge, attitudes, and perceptions of changes in implementation of an integrated collaboration between these professional roles. The proposed research, approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB), investigated typical educational practice and attitudes.

Participants

Eight School Counseling Master's students completed the SCIP Program as SCIP Fellows. All participants were White females with ages ranging from 22 to 26 ($M=23.57$, $SD=1.18$). In the Fall semester, all eight fellows (100.0%) participated in the September survey, and five (62.50%) participated in the December survey. For those eight fellows in the Spring semester, three (37.5%) participated in the January survey, and five (62.5%) participated in the April survey.

Instruments

The online Qualtrics survey includes the project team-developed SCIP Knowledge and Attitude Scale. The knowledge scale comprised a total of 18 items, 16 of which were multiple choice and two were true/false questions. Items in the knowledge scale were selected from major training concepts in the program, including items related to the MTSS model, and potential student mental health needs. The team met as a group to review the items together to ensure the face validity and that the items had covered all learning materials. The evaluation team calculated the number of correct answers out of total number of items and the percentage of accuracy rate. Due to the small sample size ($n=8$), the reliability Kuder-Richardson (KR-20) coefficient was .46 for the knowledge scale, which is close to the acceptable range of reliability (.50) for a newly developed knowledge scale (Nunnally, 1967). Participants' responses to the knowledge scale were analyzed item by item using Chi-square tests. A bootstrapping procedure with 5,000 resamples and replacement was also utilized.

The attitude survey (adapted from Whitman et al., 2010) included 15 items (five-point Likert-type scales ranging from “*Strongly Disagree*” to “*Strongly Agree*”) designed to assess participants' confidence levels in collaboration with school nurses and ESOL teachers, along with their confidence in their ability to provide integrative care. Cronbach's alpha indicated exceptionally high internal consistency reliability for the attitude survey. For the collaboration subscale, the Cronbach's alpha was .944 (six items); for the ability subscale, it was .965 (nine items); and for the overall scale, it was .797. These findings indicate a robust level of internal consistency reliability. The focus group interview protocol conducted by an external evaluator, explored participating fellows' perceptions and experiences in working with school counselors, school nurses, and ESOL teachers during their practicum and internship. Interview questions explored students' insights into various aspects of integrated collaboration among school counselors, school nurses, and ESOL teachers. Topics included examples of their professional interactions, missed opportunities for collaboration, expectations of the program, perceived benefits and challenges, and suggestions for improvement. Focus group interviews were recorded and transcribed. Transcripts were analyzed separately using thematic analysis by the external evaluator and a research assistant. They compared the analyzed results and discussed differences in reaching an agreement. The qualitative results were triangulated with quantitative results to ensure their trustworthiness and credibility.

Procedure

After the SCIP Fellows submitted the signed informed consent letter, they received a survey invitation email with an assigned survey ID number and a Qualtrics survey link. The assigned survey ID number was used to connect pre- and post- survey responses during Fall and Spring semesters. The focus group interview was recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using thematic data analysis approach.

Results

Participants' Knowledge of Integrative Care to Work with School Nurse, ESOL Teachers

This section presents the results for the evaluation question to determine “*if the SCIP program impacted participating school counseling students' knowledge of integrative care to work with school nurses, ESOL teachers, and school counselors.*” Descriptive data analyses indicated that the correct answer percentage in Knowledge Scale of School Counseling Students were 68.06% ($SD=7.72\%$), 72.22% ($SD=3.51\%$), 79.63% ($SD=3.21\%$), and 74.44% ($SD=10.83\%$) in September, December, January, and April, respectively (Table 1).

Table 1*Descriptive for Knowledge Scale by Roles— Percentage Correct*

Month	<i>n</i>	Min	Max	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
September	8	56%	78%	68.06%	7.72%
December	5	67%	78%	72.22%	3.51%
January	3	78%	83%	79.63%	3.21%
April	5	56%	83%	74.44%	10.83%

Due to lack of participants completing all four surveys and low reliability results, Chi-square Tests and a bootstrapping procedure with 5,000 resample and replacement were utilized to examine the number of the SCIP Fellows who provided correct answers across four data collection points. Results indicated no significant differences across four data collection points for each of the items. Table 2 presents frequencies of SCIP Fellows who provided correct answers for each item across four data collection points and Chi-square.

Table 2*Frequency of Correct Answers and Chi-square Test Results for Each Knowledge Item*

Item #	Sept. (<i>n</i> =8)	Dec. (<i>n</i> =5)	Jan. (<i>n</i> =3)	April (<i>n</i> =5)	$\chi^2(3)$	<i>p</i>	Cramer's <i>V</i>
1	5 (62.5%)	5 (100%)	3 (100%)	4 (80%)	3.65	.30	.42
2	4 (50%)	3 (60%)	3 (100%)	2 (40%)	3.03	.39	.38
3	8 (100%)	5 (100%)	3 (100%)	5 (100%)	---	---	---
4	8 (100%)	5 (100%)	3 (100%)	5 (100%)	---	---	---
5	6 (75%)	5 (100%)	3 (100%)	5 (100%)	3.59	.31	.31
6	5 (62.5%)	5 (100%)	3 (100%)	5 (100%)	5.69	.13	.52
7	2 (25%)	1 (20%)	2 (66.7%)	3 (60%)	3.33	.34	.34
8	8 (100%)	5 (100%)	3 (100%)	5 (100%)	---	---	---
9	8 (100%)	5 (100%)	3 (100%)	5 (100%)	---	---	---
10	1 (12.5%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1.71	.64	.64
11	8 (100%)	5 (100%)	3 (100%)	5 (100%)	---	---	---
12	3 (37.5%)	2 (40%)	0 (0%)	2 (40%)	1.76	.62	.62
13	5 (62.5%)	4 (80%)	3 (100%)	3 (60%)	2.01	.57	.57
14	7 (87.5%)	4 (80%)	3 (100%)	4 (80%)	0.79	.85	.85
15	7 (87.5%)	5 (100%)	3 (100%)	5 (100%)	1.71	.64	.64
16	2 (25%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	3.57	.31	.31
17	8 (100%)	5 (100%)	3 (100%)	5 (100%)	---	---	---
18	3 (37.5%)	1 (20%)	2 (66.7%)	4 (80%)	4.40	.22	.22

Participants' Attitude Toward Integrative Care to Work with School Nurse, ESOL Teachers

This section addresses the results for the evaluation question asking, "Does the SCIP program impact participating school counseling students' attitudes in integrative care to work with school nurses, ESOL teachers, and school counselors?" Descriptive statistics indicate participants' attitudes toward integrative care to work with school nurses and ESOL teachers to be between neutral to positive on the one to five scale in December, January, and April surveys (Table 3).

Due to lack of participants completing all four surveys, a Kruskal-Wallis Test was utilized to understand SCIP Fellows' responses in Attitude Scale across four data collection points. Results indicated that there were significant differences across four data collection points in overall Attitude Scale, Collaboration Subscale, and Ability Subscale, Kruskal-Wallis $H=9.69$, $df=3$, $p=.02$; Kruskal-Wallis $H=10.59$, $df=3$, $p=.01$; Kruskal-Wallis $H=10.06$, $df=3$, $p=.02$, respectively. Using Mann-Whitney Test as a follow-up test to examine the differences between two data collection points in the overall Attitude Scale, Collaboration and Ability Subscales, results indicated that SCIP Fellows' level of attitudes were significantly improved in December and April compared to their responses in September ($ps < .05$).

Table 3

Descriptive for Attitude Scale by Roles (Range = 1-5)

Month	<i>n</i>	Scale	Min	Max	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
September	8	Attitude	2.22	5.00	3.32	0.92
September	8	Collaborate	2.33	5.00	3.27	0.94
September	8	Ability	2.11	5.00	3.36	0.91
December	5	Attitude	1.31	5.00	4.02	1.38
December	5	Collaborate	1.17	5.00	4.03	1.44
December	5	Ability	1.44	5.00	4.02	1.32
January	3	Attitude	4.42	5.00	4.72	0.29
January	3	Collaborate	4.50	5.00	4.78	0.25
January	3	Ability	4.33	5.00	4.67	0.33
April	5	Attitude	4.67	5.00	4.92	0.14
April	5	Collaborate	4.67	5.00	4.93	0.15
April	5	Ability	4.67	5.00	4.91	0.14

Focus Group Results

To answer the evaluation question: "*What were school counseling students' perceptions toward the integrative care to work with school nurses, ESOL teachers, and school counselors?*", a focus group interview was conducted at the end of semester. All eight SCIP Fellows participated in a 50-minute focus group interview. Their responses to each of the interview prompts are summarized in the following sections, beginning with Prompt One: *Share one example of collaboration with School Counselors, School Nurses, or ESOL Teachers during this semester.* Qualitative results revealed that participants frequently collaborated with either the school nurse, school counselor, or ESOL teacher; however, collaboration between all three entities was not common.

Collaboration with the School Nurse

Participants frequently reported collaborating with school nurses to address students' physical and mental health needs. Examples included managing bed-wetting behaviors in elementary students, administering medication for panic attacks, and supporting high school students experiencing anxiety and related health concerns. School nurses also played a key role in responding to recurring issues such as

headaches, stomachaches, and injuries. Several participants emphasized the consistent and ongoing collaboration between school counselors and school nurses, describing their partnership as integral to student support. One incident described students enrolled in the ESOL program who had a physical altercation. The school nurse and ESOL teacher were described as working together to help provide information on what happened and the needs of the students to the school counselor.

ESOL Teacher and School Counselor Collaboration

A common theme highlighted the relationship between the ESOL teacher and school counselor. For example, one participant explained that this collaboration was important for helping acclimate new, non-English speaking students to their school. In another participant's situation, the ESOL teacher traveled between schools within the school district, so they were not present at the school every day. However, the ESOL teacher worked with the school counselor to meet every time they were at the school so they could assist as needed and provide updates on students.

Language Barriers

The most common theme among participants' responses was the desire to collaborate with an ESOL teacher due to language barriers with students. This issue was noted from both an educational and health-based perspective. For example, many responses described the issues that language barriers caused in the classroom including instructional delivery on how to engage in an online activity, daily guidance on lesson plans, and challenges completing college applications for non-US citizens or non-English speaking high school students. From a health focus, participants wished they could have collaborated more with an ESOL teacher to communicate about students' feelings and mental health or discuss important issues like hygiene. Additionally, one participant mentioned the importance of being able to communicate with students when critical topics were discussed like those from the Child Advocacy Center. The majority of participants had to rely at some point on Google Translate to provide directions or information due to these language barriers.

Facilitating New Students' Adjustment

A few instances of missed collaboration came from a lack of ESOL teacher resources to help introduce new students to the school and assist them in adjusting to a new place. One participant highlighted that their school counselor was assigned to showing students around, but wished there was an opportunity to collaborate with an ESOL teacher to, "...be there to kind of speak their language, to make them feel more comfortable." In a different situation, a participant explained that they had a deaf student transfer who did not know American Sign Language (ASL), and due to the lack of an ESOL teacher, specifically an ESOL teacher who signed in other languages, it took two months for the student's mental health and language barriers to be addressed.

Next, the results of participants' responses to focus group interview Prompt Two are summarized in the following sections. Prompt Two took the form of a question: *"In what ways do you anticipate this integrated collaborative program impacts the mental health of every individual at school?"*

Social Integration and Support for Students

One theme which emerged was that the integrative collaborative program could provide support for students while also allowing, and encouraging, more social interaction and incorporation for MLE students. One participant explained that this integrative collaborative program could offer students more opportunities to bond and build friendships because she often saw that without this collaboration, the MLEs:

"...were disconnected from their peers because they didn't understand what they were saying, and their peers didn't understand what they were saying." Another participant highlighted the way she anticipates this program will help address students' needs. She discussed the importance of the program in meeting students' basic needs, like hygiene, and that "having that triangle [the relationship between the school counselor, ESOL teacher, and school nurse] be a really consistent and stable system, is really beneficial for students, just for basic needs."

Educational Development

Participants noted the integrated collaborative program's potential impact on students' educational development. For example, a participant explained that "having collaboration with all three health would speed up the student's progress as well, and their development and being engaged and being included into the community," suggesting the overarching benefits this program could have on students' mental health and overall well-being.

Focus interview participants' responses to Prompt Three are summarized in the following section. The prompt was: *"Describe any benefit you have observed this integrated collaborative program has on the school members."*

Student Support

Participants noted student support as a key outcome of the integrated collaborative program. An important example of this concept was illustrated when the school nurse, ESOL teacher, and school counselor all worked together to support a child in the case of abuse. An MLE was able to go to the nurse to express being in pain through the aid of the ESOL teacher. With the help of the ESOL teacher to translate and advocate for the child, the nurse was able to understand the situation better. From there, the nurse was able to speak to the school counselor, and they were able to get the correct agency involved. This was a pivotal moment of collaboration to provide support for this student.

Prompt Four of the focus group interview was: *"Describe any challenges or barriers you have observed/experienced in implementing this integrated collaborative program."* Respondents noted four barriers and challenges that are summarized in the following sections.

Scheduling Challenges

Most of the participants noted the importance of this collaborative program. However, participants often expressed concern about difficulties in being able to find a time and schedule that works for all three to meet. This sentiment is described perfectly by a participant who states, "...but there is a lot of difficulty finding times with all the needs, schedules, and lack of resources for [collaboration] to occur."

Lack of Resources

A common theme that challenged program implementation was lack of resources. Participants often noted the lack of consistent ESOL staffing due to itinerate positions in the district. This inconsistency presented trouble for the participants when working with MLEs because they could not communicate effectively. Another participant described a lack of physical resources in which their school nurse "constantly ... has to go and purchase things like Band-aids or gloves." The participant explained not having these resources was a challenge because they could not provide proper care for students' most basic needs.

Competing Perspectives

The issue of dealing with competing viewpoints emerged during the focus group discussion. A participant explained that they noticed, "...we had two different perspectives. We have a medical model perspective from the school nurse. But then the school counselor had ... more of a mental health [model], and so ... they weren't really on the same page." This example suggests that even when a school nurse and counselor were able to collaborate, their perspectives may cause conflict in the collaboration.

ESOL Teacher Importance

One participant expressed that in a dream world, they felt "...[I]t would be beneficial to have ESOL teachers [as] mandatory in all schools." While this was not a suggestion specific to the program, it emphasizes the recognized importance of the ESOL teacher's role within the program.

Finally, focus group interview participants were invited to use one sentence to summarize their experiences with collaboration with School Nurses and ESOL teachers throughout the previous semester. Two common threads appeared in the respondents' single-sentence answers to this prompt. Those results are presented in the following two sections.

Hopeful For More Collaboration

Participants felt thankful for their experiences; however, overwhelmingly they noted that they hoped to see more collaboration in the future. For example, a participant explained her sentiment as "I wish there was more" because she did not have an ESOL teacher to collaborate with, so she wanted to see more of the intersection between the three roles in the following semester. Many others highlighted similar situations where they were able to work more with either the school nurse, school counselor, or in some cases the ESOL teacher, but wanted to see their interactions play out more.

Informative

Another theme revealed that participants felt their previous semester experience was informative. This theme is illustrated by a participant explaining that they had never considered this type of collaboration before but, since this program "... it just has really been informative on how those relationships can improve the student's overall well-being." Similarly, another participant noted how she appreciated being able to observe how the collaboration can "...greatly benefit students and their experiences."

Discussion

The purpose of this article was to discuss the first-year program evaluation findings from a U.S. Department of Education MHSP Demonstration Grant Program. The SCIP incorporated training focusing on SDOH and collaboration between school counselors, school nurses, and ESOL teachers to increase mental health services in rural schools in Alabama. Furthermore, SCIP Fellows applied their training during their practicum and internship experiences by collaborating with school counselors, school nurses, and ESOL teachers.

The first research question examined whether the program enhanced participants' knowledge of integrative care with school nurses, ESOL teachers, and school counselors. The results may reflect students' training in data-informed practices to guide services and interventions (ASCA, 2019), emphasizing collaboration across disciplines to meet student needs (Johnson et al, 2023a, b; Mason et al., 2021; Tuttle et al., 2018; Tuttle et al., 2021; Tuttle et al., 2022). Other data points included reviewing discipline referrals, attendance record and trends, academic reports, and conducting a needs assessment (ASCA, 2019).

The second research question explored how the SCIP program impacted participating school counseling students' attitudes toward integrative care with school nurses, ESOL teachers, and school counselors. These results may be attributed to the training focusing on SDOH and the implications for collaboration to increase mental health services in rural Alabama schools. The significant improvement of the level of attitudes informs the school counseling field about how training can influence students' attitudes to engage in collaboration. Furthermore, integration of SDOH during the training process may further support attitude development.

The third research question sought to determine the school counselor students' perceptions toward integrative care work with school nurses, ESOL teachers, and school counselors. The qualitative results revealed that many of the participants frequently collaborated with either the school nurse, school counselor, or ESOL teacher (exemplifying the implementation of the SCIP training to increase mental health services in rural schools through the collaboration); however, collaboration between all three health professionals was not common. This may be attributed to the lack of resources, lack of key personnel available, and lack of understanding of each other's role. Additionally, based on the results highlighting the SCIP Fellows' awareness of access to student supports through collaboration, lack of resources such as

medical nursing supplies, and barriers to access of personnel may be attributed to their application of pedagogical practices focusing on SDOH during their practicum and internship experiences (Gantt et al., 2021).

Implications for Counselor Educators

Implications for counselor educators include incorporating training focusing on interdisciplinary and cross-disciplinary collaboration between school counselors, school nurses, and ESOL teachers to increase mental health services in rural school settings within school counseling training programs (De Oliveira & Wachter Morris, 2015; Johnson et al., 2023a, b; Mason et al., 2021; Purgason et al., 2024; Tuttle et al., 2021; Tuttle et al., 2022;). Replication of this training within other school counseling training programs would offer research opportunities while providing opportunities to engage in interdisciplinary and cross-disciplinary collaboration while addressing mental health disparities.

Limitations

Limitations for this study include the small sample size and the program being only in its first year. For this study, only eight SCIP Fellows were examined and not all of them completed the surveys. While there is lack of participation in the evaluation, the results indicated significant improvement in knowledge, attitudes, and perceptions of collaboration between school nurses, ESOL teachers, and school counselors. Another specific limitation was the lack of diversity based on the eight SCIP Fellows who were White females. Additionally, the results from this program evaluation research study focused on the first year of implementation of SCIP which was considered a limitation due to not having a previous year of implementation for reference. However, this allowed the authors to implement the program and learn from the program evaluation results.

Future Research

Future research may include survey development on SDOH and school counselor collaboration within school counseling training programs (Gantt et al., 2021). Additionally, future research focusing on a diverse participant pool would provide further considerations of students' knowledge, attitudes, and perceptions of integrated care while collaborating. Researchers may consider surveying graduates a year after program completion to determine whether their knowledge, attitudes, and perceptions remained consistent or improved while working as school counselors.

Conclusion

SCIP prepares school counseling students to collaborate with school counselors, school nurses, and ESOL teachers to increase mental health services in rural schools in Alabama. This unique training addresses the vital need for integrated care to address K-12 student mental and physical well-being in rural areas where access to mental health resources is limited. Furthermore, school counseling students learned about the roles of school nurses and ESOL teachers which positions them to understand how each role works with one another to ensure continuity of care. The results from the program evaluation inform researchers and counselor educators about the efficacy of this training experience.

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About the Authors

Malti Tuttle, Ph.D., LPC (GA), CPCS (GA), ATS, NCC, NCSC, is a Professor and School Counseling Program Coordinator at Auburn University. She also serves as the co-director of the Rural Access and Interventions for School Counseling Education (RAISE) Lab. Dr. Tuttle has over 20 years of educational experience which includes serving as a teacher, school counselor, and counselor educator. Her research science aligns with social justice issues, school counseling advocacy, collaboration, rural school counseling, Multilingual Learners, and Animal Assisted Therapy/Interventions.

Morgan Yordy, DNP, ACNS-BC, RN, FCNS, is an Associate Professor at Auburn University College of Nursing with over 22 years of experience in nursing. As an Advanced Practice Registered Nurse specializing in community health, she has published and presented extensively on interventions that enhance children's health and well-being, as well as interdisciplinary collaboration. Her work reflects a deep commitment to improving health outcomes through evidence-based practice and community engagement.

Jamie Harrison, Ed.D., is a Professor of English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) Education in the Department of Curriculum and Teaching. Her primary research interests center on the role of advocacy in the work of ESOL teachers. She has also conducted research about teachers' implicit and explicit beliefs and attitudes about multilingual learners. Dr. Harrison teaches several courses in the graduate ESOL education program and is currently acting as the program coordinator.

Chih-hsuan Wang, Ph.D., is a Professor of Educational Research, Measurement, and Assessment in the Department of Educational Foundations, Leadership, and Technology. She teaches courses in research methods and data analysis. Her research and current projects focus on: (1) issues related to nursing and health education, (2) psychological factors influencing students' motivation and learning, (3) students' motivation and learning outcomes in e-learning environments and K–12 STEM education, and (4) factors affecting international students' motivation and learning. She also contributes to funded research projects, develops assessment materials for evaluation, conducts data analyses, and prepares research reports.

Lyndsay Deal, Ph.D., LPC, NCC, BC-TMH, is an Assistant Professor at Creighton University. Her research interests are related to weight and health bias in counselor education and practice.

John McCall, Ph.D., is an Assistant Professor and School Counseling Practicum and Internship Coordinator at Auburn University. He earned a Doctor of Philosophy in Counselor Education from the University of Georgia. He is a licensed professional school counselor (Georgia). His research interests include chemical and behavioral addictions, adverse childhood experiences, emotion-regulation, and school counseling paradigms including AI.

“This Isn’t as Bad as I Thought”: Rural QTBIPOC Students’ Narratives of School Counseling

Harley Locklear, *Virginia Tech*

Rural queer and transgender Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (QTBIPOC) youth navigate layered inequities that shape academic, social/emotional, and mental health outcomes. This narrative inquiry explored how six rural QTBIPOC students perceived and experienced school counseling, with particular attention to help-seeking related to sexual/affectional and/or gender identity. Participants completed a brief written reflection and a semi-structured interview; data were analyzed through iterative narrative and cross-case analysis. Six themes described how counseling became (or failed to become) a viable support: (a) students often interpreted the school counselor role as vague and primarily academic; (b) help-seeking operated as risk management in close-knit rural contexts where disclosure could invite judgment, minimization, or exposure; (c) counselor identity and perceived competence shaped expectations of being understood versus the burden of translation; (d) perceptions shifted over time through direct encounters and peer-shared narratives; (e) positive experiences were anchored in rapport, validation, and active privacy practices; and (f) students framed advocacy as “small but radical” actions that increased safety and visibility under constraint. Implications are offered for rural school counselors and counselor education to strengthen culturally responsive, queer-affirming practice and reduce barriers to support.

Keywords: rural; queer; trans; BIPOC: school counseling

Across the United States, queer and transgender youth continue to navigate K–12 settings where queer and trans identities are frequently treated as peripheral, unsafe, or controversial. Although social acceptance of some LGBTQ+ identities has increased (Minkin et al., 2025), students still report discrimination, harassment, and systemic exclusion (Gnan et al., 2019; Kosciw et al., 2022; Savage & Chandling, 2013). For youth who also identify as Black, Indigenous, and/or People of Color, these experiences are intensified through overlapping racism, heterosexism, and cisnormativity, contributing to heightened bullying, absenteeism, and mental health distress (Cyrus, 2017; Murphy & Hardaway, 2017).

Rural contexts can further amplify these inequities. Close-knit social networks, community surveillance, and limited access to affirming resources increase the risks associated with visibility and disclosure (Bishop & McClellan, 2016; O’Connell, 2010). Within this ecology, school counselors may be among the most accessible support providers (Kuff et al., 2019) and are ethically charged to serve students

equitably across identity and development (ASCA, 2022). Yet counselors' ability to enact this role may be constrained by role expectations, community pressures, and uneven preparation for LGBTQ+ and intersectional concerns (Beck et al., 2014; Kuff et al., 2019; Lloyd-Hazlett & Foster, 2013).

Despite growing scholarship on LGBTQ+ youth and school counseling, less is known about how rurality, race, and queer/trans identity intersect in students' perceptions of counseling—particularly how students assess whether counseling is safe, relevant, and culturally responsive. This study addresses that gap by using narrative inquiry to explore rural QTBIPOC students' perceptions and lived experiences of school counseling related to sexual/affectional and/or gender identity.

Literature Review

QTBIPOC Students and Intersectional School Experiences

In this study, QTBIPOC is used as an umbrella term to describe Black, Indigenous, and People of Color who also identify with sexual/affectional and/or gender identities outside dominant heterosexual and cisgender norms. The term is not intended to suggest a singular or uniform identity; rather, it foregrounds the intersection of racialized, sexual/affectional, and gendered identities while recognizing that participants' experiences and self-identifications remain distinct. Consistent with an intersectional framing, these identities are understood as situated within social structures that differentially confer privilege and marginalization.

Historically, scholarship on LGBTQ+ experiences has often centered White queer narratives in ways that can obscure the realities of queer and trans youth of color (Rosenblum, 1994). QTBIPOC students occupy a distinct position in schools because their experiences are shaped by overlapping systems of oppression. Intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1989) provides a framework for understanding how racism, heterosexism, and cisnormativity operate simultaneously, producing school experiences that cannot be reduced to a single identity category (Cyrus, 2017; Murphy & Hardaway, 2017).

Across the broader LGBTQ+ student population, discrimination and hostile school climates are associated with elevated victimization, absenteeism, and mental health concerns (Gnan et al., 2019; Kosciw et al., 2022; Savage & Chandling, 2013). These conditions have academic consequences: students may avoid school spaces, disengage from extracurriculars, or miss class to reduce exposure to harassment, contributing to achievement and attendance disparities (Gnan et al., 2019; Kosciw et al., 2022). Mental health disparities further heighten risk, including elevated depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation, with QTBIPOC youth often experiencing intensified vulnerability due to compounded minority stress (Cyrus, 2017; Murphy & Hardaway, 2017; Trevor Project, 2022). Because affirming support is a well-established protective factor, limited access to culturally responsive mental health resources—particularly in rural areas—raises the importance of school-based supports (Ramos & Chavira, 2022).

Intersectional conditions shape not only exposure to harm but also what support feels culturally intelligible. QTBIPOC students may weigh whether helpers can recognize racism-, culture-, and family-

context stress as central (rather than peripheral) to identity development, and whether dominant narratives of queer experience align with their realities. When support is grounded in assumptions that privilege more socially protected pathways (e.g., uncomplicated disclosure and public identity affirmation), students who face cultural, familial, or safety constraints may anticipate misunderstanding and withhold disclosure. These dynamics can increase the burden of self-explanation and reduce the likelihood that school-based help feels usable.

Rural Context as a Condition Shaping Visibility, Safety, and Support

Rural schooling contexts can shape help-seeking in distinctive ways. Close-knit social networks, religious conservatism, and limited access to mental health or queer-affirming resources can heighten the perceived risk of being “known” or targeted (Bishop & McClellan, 2016; O’Connell, 2010). In such contexts, visibility may increase vulnerability, and students may anticipate social consequences if identity disclosure becomes public (Kosciw et al., 2015). For QTBIPOC youth, rurality can further intersect with racial isolation and constrained access to culturally competent care, amplifying barriers to belonging and support. These dynamics also shape how students determine whether support is safe before ever initiating contact. In tightly networked settings, help-seeking decisions may be influenced by observations of what happens to peers and by reputational information that circulates through friend groups, making trust socially mediated rather than solely dyadic. Relatedly, rural visibility heightens the practical stakes of confidentiality; students may avoid services not because they reject counseling, but because being seen accessing support can function as unintended disclosure. For QTBIPOC youth, these conditions can intensify the perceived costs of seeking help, even when school-based services are formally available.

The School Counselor Role, Preparation, and Constraints in Rural Schools

School counselors are often positioned as key providers of student support, yet their ability to enact this role is shaped by training, institutional demands, and community norms. ASCA (2022) outlines an equity-oriented professional mandate that includes advocacy for students marginalized by sexual, affectional, gender, racial, and cultural identities. However, research suggests counselors may report limited preparation and lower self-efficacy for supporting LGBTQ+ students and addressing intersectional concerns (Beck et al., 2014; Kuff et al., 2019; Lloyd-Hazlett & Foster, 2013). Role expectations can also narrow what students experience counselors as “for,” particularly when counselors’ time is dominated by scheduling, testing, and postsecondary planning. When counseling is publicly communicated primarily through academic functions, students may come to view identity-related concerns as outside the counselor’s scope—even if counselors are trained to address them. In rural communities where identity disclosure is already high-stakes, unclear role messaging can function as a barrier by increasing uncertainty about what is safe to name and by shifting the burden onto students to test the boundaries of support.

In rural settings, counselors may face additional constraints related to community norms and administrative pressures. In contexts where LGBTQ+ affirmation may be contested, counselors may avoid

explicit engagement with identity-related concerns to reduce conflict with parents or school leadership (Guest et al., 2024; Bishop & McClellan, 2016). Yet when counselors provide visible allyship, validate identity, protect confidentiality, and advocate against bullying, students report greater safety and belonging (De Pedro et al., 2018; Greytak, 2013; Goodrich & Luke, 2010; Leung et al., 2022). What remains underexamined is how rural QTBIPOC students interpret these dynamics—including what signals safety, what produces disengagement, and what practices are experienced as affirming under rural constraints.

Research Gap

Prior research establishes that LGBTQ+ youth face significant school-based inequities and that rural context can amplify risk through heightened visibility and limited resources. The literature also documents variability in counselor preparedness and the constraints counselors may experience in rural schools. However, less is known about how these dynamics operate for rural QTBIPOC students specifically, and how students' perceptions of counselor role, identity, privacy, and advocacy shape whether counseling becomes a viable resource. To address this gap, this narrative inquiry centers rural QTBIPOC students' accounts of their school counseling experiences related to sexual, affectional, and/or gender identity. This study was guided by the following research questions: (1) What are the perceptions of school counselors among QTBIPOC students in rural schools? (2) What are the experiences of QTBIPOC students who seek help from school counselors in rural schools?

Method

Methodology

Human experience is inherently storied, and the telling of these narratives, especially of those whose stories have gone untold, promotes power, agency, and resilience for those who live in the margins (Hendry, 2007; Jones, 2016). Narrative inquiry is a qualitative methodology focused on the study of experience as narrated, attending to the interwoven dimensions of temporality (past–present–future), sociality (personal and social conditions), and place (the specific contexts in which experience occurs) (Clandinin, 2022; Clandinin & Caine, 2013). Narrative inquiry was selected because it offered an approach suited to exploring how rural QTBIPOC students interpret school counseling encounters without reducing their experiences to decontextualized themes alone.

Study Design: Retrospective Narrative Accounts

Due to recruitment constraints related to working with minors and the contemporary sociopolitical climate surrounding queer issues (Ramos & Chaviral 2022; Schelbe et al., 2015; Wimberly & Battle, 2015), this study used a retrospective design with recent high school graduates who were proximally removed from their rural schooling experiences. Retrospective designs are useful when concurrent research is infeasible and can yield high-quality accounts when the temporal distance from events is relatively close

(Schwartz & Sudman, 2012). To strengthen recall and support narrative specificity, participants completed a brief written reflection prior to interviewing, which functioned as an autobiographical text to “trigger the telling of stories” and anchor interviews in concrete events (Clandinin & Caine, 2013).

Importantly, this study treats retrospective narratives not as objective records of the past, but as meaning-making accounts shaped by present standpoint. Participants' developmental maturation, increased access to LGBTQ+ discourse (e.g., in college settings), and distance from rural communities may have influenced how experiences were interpreted and narrated. Accordingly, the analytic approach intentionally attended to how participants narrated change over time.

Participants

Participants were recruited using purposive, convenience, and snowball sampling (Creswell et al., 2007; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Robinson, 2014). Recruitment materials were distributed via LGBTQ+ centers, social media groups (e.g., Facebook, LinkedIn), and identity-based undergraduate organizations. Inclusion criteria included: (a) identifying with a sexual/affectional and/or gender identity outside heterosexual and/or cisgender identities; (b) identifying as Black, Indigenous, and/or a Person of Color; (c) graduating from high school within the last four academic years; (d) attending a school in a rural area as defined by U.S. Census criteria (Ratcliffe et al., 2016); (e) access to Zoom; and, (f) being 18 years or older. Six participants were selected after eligibility screening. The selection process was focused on meaningful variation across racial/ethnic identities, sexual/affectional identities, gender identities, and rural contexts to illuminate diverse patterns of meaning-making. Recruitment stopped at six cases based on information power—the combination of: (a) a specific sample (rural QTBIPOC recent graduates), (b) focused research questions, (c) rich narrative interviews, and (d) strong relevance of the narratives to the phenomenon under study—rather than aiming for theoretical saturation as used in other qualitative approaches. Participant demographics are presented in Table 1 using self-selected pseudonyms.

Table 1*Participant Demographics*

Pseudonym	Age	Racial/ Ethnic Identity	Sexual/ Affectional Identity	Gender Identity	Pronouns	Post- Secondary
Daniel	21	Black/African American	Bisexual	Cisgender Male	He/Him	4-year college
G	18	Native American/ White	Bisexual	Cisgender Female	She/Her	4-year college
Pasack	21	Native American	Queer	Cisgender Male	He/Him	4-year college
Soob	19	Latine	Queer	Non- Binary	They/ Them	2-year college
Lilo	19	Black/African American	Pansexual	Cisgender Female	She/Her	2-year college
Tomas	19	Latine	Gay	Cisgender Male	He/Him	4-year college

Data Collection

Data collection consisted of a demographic questionnaire, written reflection and a semi-structured interview. Prior to the interview, participants responded to a written prompt centered on their first experience seeking help from a school counselor regarding their sexual/affectional and/or gender identity. The written reflections were treated as narrative artifacts that anchored participants in specific events and were included as analytic materials (Clandinin & Caine, 2013). I then conducted 60–90-minute semi-structured Zoom interviews, which were audio/video recorded and transcribed using Otter.ai. Interview questions centered on precipitating factors leading to help-seeking, school counseling experiences, and student perceptions. Following each interview, I wrote a reflexive journal entry documenting emerging interpretations and assumptions shaped by positionality. Prior to analysis, participants were offered the opportunity to review their interview transcripts for accuracy, clarify statements, and identify any transcription errors or content they wished to amend; no substantive corrections or clarifications were requested.

Data Analysis

Narrative inquiry involves iterative and reflexive analysis that attends to both the integrity of individual narratives and patterns across narratives (Clandinin, 2022). To balance idiographic richness with cross-case understanding, analysis occurred in two linked phases: (1) within-case narrative analysis (narrative smoothing and re-storying) and (2) cross-case paradigmatic narrative analysis (coding and theme development) (Clandinin, 2022; Polkinghorne, 1995).

During the initial phase of analysis each participant's interview and written reflection were read multiple times to construct a coherent narrative account that preserved sequence, turning points, and meaning-making across temporality, sociality, and place. I engaged in narrative deconstruction and narrative smoothing by identifying core events, tensions, and resolutions most central to the research questions, while maintaining the internal logic and voice of each participant's story (Kim, 2016). Analytic memos documented how each narrative portrayed help-seeking, counselor role, perceived safety, and rural context. This phase ensured that cross-case claims were grounded in intact narrative cases rather than fragmented excerpts.

I used paradigmatic narrative analysis to examine patterns across cases (Polkinghorne, 1995). Coding proceeded through three iterative cycles. During the first stage, I used open and in-vivo coding to identify recurring words, phrases, concepts, and meanings across transcripts and written reflections (Saldaña, 2016), resulting in 146 distinct codes. In the second stage, I engaged axial coding to cluster codes into analytic categories that captured relationships among conditions (e.g., rural visibility and surveillance), interpretive processes (e.g., safety appraisal), and counseling experiences (e.g., role ambiguity, affirmation, confidentiality) (Saldaña, 2016). In the final cycle, I used constant comparison across cases to refine categories into six cross-case themes that best represented shared experiences and meaning-making similarities while preserving narrative complexity. Themes were repeatedly checked against participant narratives to ensure they remained grounded in participants' storied contexts rather than decontextualized excerpts (Clandinin, 2022; Kim, 2016). Throughout analysis, reflexive journal entries were consistently referenced to surface and bracket positionality-informed assumptions and support interpretive accountability.

Researcher Positionality and Reflexivity

Positionality is integral to qualitative rigor because knowledge is co-constructed through researcher-participant relationships and interpretive decisions (Holmes, 2020). I identify as a queer Indigenous man raised and educated in rural Southeastern North Carolina. This study emerged from my commitment to amplifying narratives that are often marginalized within educational institutions and within research, and from my own experience of receiving queer-affirming support from my rural school counselor.

My shared identity and experience functions as both a strength and a potential bias. Shared cultural knowledge enhanced rapport and interpretive sensitivity, yet it also inclined foregrounding narratives of possibility or resonance. To address this, reflexivity practices were integrated throughout the study,

including journaling after each interview, memoing analytic decisions, and explicitly interrogating how my investment could shape what was heard, emphasized, or interpreted.

Trustworthiness and Rigor

Trustworthiness was guided by Tracy's (2010) eight criteria for qualitative quality. The study received Institutional Review Board approval. Participants provided informed consent and selected pseudonyms to protect confidentiality and extend agency over representation (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2021). Credibility was supported through the use of complementary participant-generated narrative materials, including written reflections and semi-structured interviews, and through repeatedly checking interpretations against participants' full narrative accounts. Reflexive journal entries were used not as independent corroborating data, but to document and interrogate researcher assumptions throughout data collection and analysis. Dependability and confirmability were further supported through an audit trail that included coding documentation, analytic memos, and reflexive journaling. Transferability was supported through rich, thick description of participants' contexts, identities, and narrative conditions.

Findings

This study resulted in the curation of six themes that illustrate the narrative arc of rural QTBIPOC counseling experiences. The findings that follow trace participant narratives from initial role ambiguity and barriers to help-seeking, to the conditions that facilitated positive counseling experiences and the forms of "small but radical" advocacy students identified as most consequential in rural school contexts.

"How should I go about getting help? And the sad part is, I didn't know...": Perception of School Counselor Role

The first theme, named from Daniel's interview, illustrates how the omission of queer-affirming and culturally responsive messaging shaped participants' understandings of what role school counselors played. Across accounts, students learned—implicitly—that the concerns most consequential to their daily lives (e.g., sexuality, gender, race-based stress, and belonging) were not legitimate reasons to seek school-based support. Daniel described this distancing effect simply: "It's not like I thought less of them, but more so I just never really thought of them in general." For rural QTBIPOC students navigating conservative contexts, counselors became peripheral not necessarily because of direct harm, but because the counselor role was introduced in vague, procedural terms that required students to translate their lived experiences into institutionally acceptable reasons for help-seeking. As G recalled, counselors appeared early on to say, "Hey, we're here if you need us," but didn't even tell us what type of things they could help us with." Soob similarly remembered being told, "If you ever need help, just reach out," without any explicit naming of "tough times," mental health, discrimination, relationships, sexuality, or gender. In this context, ambiguity did not read as neutral; it often functioned as a kind of institutional silence. When counseling is publicly

framed around what is measurable and politically safe, the absence of explicit language about identity and oppression can reinforce heteronormative and racialized norms by teaching students which topics are able to be spoken in school, and which are better kept private. The consequence was delay, uncertainty, and disengagement from supports that students could not see reflected in the counseling role.

Participants' perceptions were further narrowed by experiencing counselors primarily as academic advisors. Pasack captured how this coding constrained what felt possible to bring to counseling: "It's odd to me that people actually talk to guidance counselors about their sexuality. It was very academic-based...we just went there for class changes and left as soon as it was done." Here, identity talk became not merely uncommon but almost unintelligible—as if it violated the expected script. Participants connected this academic emphasis to rural institutional pressures and aspirational narratives about mobility and achievement. Pasack described a push to "get test scores up" and "get rural students to college so they can come back to their communities," while G noted counselors were "really encouraging us to go to college because they knew how difficult it is for BIPOC students." Although these commitments supported important access goals, they also positioned students' futures primarily through achievement, leaving emotional and identity development under-addressed.

"I didn't feel comfortable talking about my sexuality to my high school counselors": Factors Impacting Help-Seeking Behaviors

The second theme, titled from Pasack's interview, shows that help-seeking hinged on assessing relational and social risk in contexts where identity-based disclosures can travel quickly and carry consequences. Participants did not evaluate counselors as neutral professionals; they evaluated them as community members embedded in a conservative rural ecosystem—someone whose beliefs, affiliations, and social ties could determine whether disclosure would be met with affirmation, minimization, moral judgment, or inadvertent exposure. In these accounts, rurality functioned as an organizing context: conservative politics, religion, and heteronormativity were often treated as default, and the counseling office was read through those same community expectations.

Several participants described counselors' self-presentation and perceived ideology as immediate cues about whether queer identity could be named without penalty. Pasack recalled a counselor referencing "her affiliation with a political party that doesn't support LGBTQ people," which "didn't help the case of... 'this is a safe space for me to explore my sexuality.'" The point was less partisan detail than the signal it produced: the counselor's disclosure suggested alignment with norms students already experienced as constraining, raising the likelihood that counseling would reproduce the same heteronormative expectations present elsewhere in the school community. Tomas similarly described how rural context intensified anticipatory distrust: "I had a hard time believing that anyone from my community would be accepting of my queer identity, even the counselor." "Even the counselor" highlights that professional role alone did not confer safety; instead, students weighed the counselor's embeddedness in local networks and the potential

social repercussions of being known. For Tomas, help-seeking became a last resort—"My back was against a wall"—only after sustained bullying made silence untenable.

At the same time, participants' stories complicate the assumption that rural context functions only as barrier. Daniel's narrative suggests that perceived distance from local networks could create an opening for disclosure. When two new counselors arrived from outside his community, he explained, "We didn't have any info on them... I was willing to take the risk... when I heard they weren't from my hometown." Here, help-seeking operated as risk management: outsider status reduced the likelihood of social entanglement and made it easier to test safety. Across accounts, counselors were evaluated as potential gatekeepers of normative belonging—either as extensions of dominant community ideology or, in rarer cases, as comparatively safer figures because they were less socially accountable to local expectations.

Family cultural narratives created a second layer shaping whether counseling was imaginable as a legitimate resource. For some participants, counseling was culturally coded as shameful, unnecessary, or indicative of weakness, producing stigma that narrowed what could be shared and with whom. Soob explained, "There's still that mentality that therapy is for crazy people... it affects children because they hesitate to reach out—they're scared someone will judge them or think they're weak." Tomas similarly described counseling as something he "kind of knew internally... wasn't something I'd have access to," adding, "my culture, my family—it felt saddening because I had less access to resources than I should have." In rural areas where alternative supports may already be limited, stigma did not merely discourage service use—it effectively removed counseling from the menu of coping options. Taken together, these narratives show that students' reluctance was not disengagement but an adaptive response to intersecting systems of normativity at school and at home, where disclosure could carry real social costs.

"They Just Didn't Have the Cultural Background and Awareness": Impact of Counselor Identity

The third theme, titled from Soob's interview, highlights counselor identity as a relational condition shaping students' expectations of being understood and the amount of work required to be understood. For rural QTBIPOC students, counselor identity often operated as a proxy for multicultural and queer competence—signaling whether counseling would feel culturally attuned and emotionally safe, or whether students would need to translate, justify, or educate in order to receive support. In participants' accounts, identity functioned less as a preference and more as a risk-and-effort calculation: whether disclosure would be met with immediate recognition or with requests (explicit or implied) to provide cultural context before care could begin.

Participants frequently linked counselors' racial and cultural identities to how readily they expected their experiences to be legible, particularly when discussing stressors inseparable from race, culture, and community context. Daniel described the anticipated relief of not having to translate: "It kind of sucks not having a Black counselor... I think I'd feel more understood. I wouldn't have to explain why I feel the way I do in certain situations." Even when counseling was helpful, the expectation of having to "explain why"

created friction—especially in rural settings where being seen as different already carries social risk. Soob similarly described how counselor Whiteness shaped perceptions before any session occurred: “We had mostly minority students, and the counselor being White did affect a lot of people—they felt she wouldn’t understand.” Students also noted how dominant, White-centered scripts can narrow what counselors recognize as “typical” queer experience. Soob critiqued a counselor-led GSA talk that framed coming out as the default pathway: “She went into specifics that sounded centered toward White people... ‘this is how you come out,’ but we never talked about people who can’t come out or only tell their chosen family.” For queer students of color, such scripts can erase the relational, cultural, and safety constraints that make disclosure complex or impossible, reinforcing the sense that their realities sit outside what the counseling space is prepared to hold.

Participants also described queer counselor identity as an immediate signal of safety, often because it reduced the likelihood of heteronormative discomfort or moral judgment and lowered the burden of explanation. Daniel shared, “It was nice... these were people who had experience with that lifestyle and weren’t disapproving. It was just nice to have that validation,” while Lilo noted, “It just made it easier to talk about queer topics with her because she would just get it.” At the same time, students emphasized that shared identity was not the only pathway to affirming care; competence could substitute for similarity when counselors demonstrated genuine knowledge and responsiveness. Soob explained, “Even if they’re not queer, just having someone who’s educated on queer issues would be really beneficial. It gets tiring having to explain every detail about my identity.” Across narratives, one of the most harmful dynamics was the transfer of educational labor onto the student. When QTBIPOC youth had to teach counselors about queer identity and cultural context, support became taxing rather than relieving, and trust diminished because the direction of care reversed. Overall, this theme suggests counselor identity matters because it shapes whether students anticipate recognition or translation, validation or explanation—and it underscores both the importance of workforce diversity and the necessity of strong multicultural and queer competence so students are not positioned to educate the professionals tasked with supporting them.

“This Isn’t as Bad as I Thought”: Changes in Perception

The fourth theme, titled from Soob’s interview, demonstrates that rural QTBIPOC students’ perceptions of school counselors were not fixed attitudes but ongoing judgments of safety shaped by accumulating evidence—both direct encounters and stories circulating through peer networks. In rural school settings where relationships are tightly woven and reputations travel quickly, participants described help-seeking as deliberate risk assessment. Students watched how counselors responded to others, weighed the likelihood of dismissal or harm, and used that information to decide whether approaching a counselor was worth the potential social cost of exposure. As Soob explained, “I didn’t trust them fully when I approached them about my identity, but once I met with them through different situations, I could build up trust and connection.” Trust, in this sense, was not presumed; it was earned through repeated interactions that signaled whether identity-related concerns would be held with care and confidentiality.

For some participants, early hope that counseling included mental and emotional support eroded after witnessing or hearing about counselors responding to queer-related concerns as if they were peripheral—or treating counseling as primarily institutional “business.” G initially believed counselors were available “if you needed help mentally or had something going on you didn’t know how to deal with,” but described her perception shifting after seeing a friend’s attempt to seek support following sexuality-based bullying be dismissed. Importantly, the impact extended beyond one interaction: in a rural context, these experiences became shared knowledge within peer networks, shaping collective expectations about what counseling could offer. Once a counselor was perceived as reproducing the school’s heteronormative status quo—or as minimizing queer students’ experiences—students described withdrawal not only individually but across friend groups, as accessing counseling came to feel both ineffective and risky.

Conversely, participants described powerful positive shifts when they encountered concrete evidence of affirmation and advocacy. Daniel emphasized that peer narratives could function as a bridge to help-seeking: “I’m not sure I would have been comfortable talking to them either—it really meant a lot to have another student hype up the counselors.” Here, “hype” operated as social verification—an informal mechanism for assessing safety in an environment where students could not assume adults would be supportive. Tomas’s story reflects an even more dramatic recalibration when a counselor offered explicit validation and intervention. After enduring bullying, he sought help with low expectations: “I didn’t expect him to do much... I thought it was pointless.” What changed his perception was not generic kindness but a clear stance: “He told me, ‘This is not okay. You don’t deserve to be picked on for who you are.’ I assumed he was just like them, and I was wrong.” The phrase “just like them” underscores how students initially located counselors within the same conservative moral ecosystem that often enforced silence and normativity. When a counselor named harm, affirmed dignity, and acted, that response disrupted the expectation that school adults would maintain the status quo.

Taken together, these accounts suggest that rural QTBIPOC students’ perceptions shift when counselors provide observable, socially shareable evidence that identity can be held safely. Trust increased when counselors demonstrated confidentiality, explicitly affirmed queer identity, and addressed bullying as unacceptable—actions that countered the assumption that counseling would replicate local conservative norms.

“It Was the First Time I Really Felt Heard”: Factors Leading to Positive Experiences

The fifth theme, titled from Tomas’ interview, identifies the relational and structural conditions under which rural QTBIPOC students experienced school counseling as affirming. Although rapport building, unconditional positive regard, and confidentiality are familiar counseling constructs, participants described them as more than generic good counseling. In rural schools marked by tight social networks, conservative norms, and rapid circulation of personal information, these practices functioned as identity-safety strategies that reduced the social risks attached to disclosure and helped students determine whether counseling could hold queer and racialized experiences with care.

Participants described rapport as a graduated pathway into disclosure rather than an abstract “relationship first” ideal. Trust was built through small, low-risk interactions—brief check-ins, informal hallway conversations, and everyday talk—that allowed students to test whether a counselor was attentive, consistent, and safe before naming higher-stakes concerns. Lilo described feeling recognized through repeated micro-interactions: “She always had positive things to say... It felt like she knew me even through our brief interactions.” Soob similarly framed rapport as scaffolding that bridged “school-safe topics” and private identity concerns: “Even if I was just telling my counselor about my day or study tips, that’s how I built the relationship—to feel comfortable talking about more sensitive topics. It’s really vulnerable and scary, especially when it’s something only you know about.” In these accounts, rapport building operated as risk reduction—an antidote to earlier themes of invisibility and uncertainty—because it created repeated evidence that the counselor saw them as a person rather than a problem to manage.

Participants also emphasized that positive experiences were anchored in counselors’ ability to communicate acceptance without interrogation, correction, or subtle moralizing—responses students experienced as rare and stabilizing in conservative contexts. Daniel captured this need succinctly: “I don’t need someone to agree with me—I just need you to listen and let me feel validated.” Lilo described acceptance not only as affirming language but as relational consistency after disclosure: her counselor “accepted me for whatever... she loved to hear my jokes and didn’t change, no matter if I was pan or straight.” The phrase “didn’t change” is central here; for students accustomed to heteronormative expectations that queer identity should be minimized or treated as controversy, the counselor’s steady presence served as proof that disclosure would not transform the student into a risk or problem.

Finally, participants positioned privacy as a prerequisite for help-seeking rather than an ethical backdrop. In small towns where “this person knows that person who knows that person,” Daniel explained, “I didn’t want my sexuality to be everyone’s business.” Importantly, students described confidentiality as something counselors had to *enact* visibly through protective logistics. Daniel noted that when sensitive topics emerged, counselors would “close the door or take me outside,” adding, “It meant a lot that they thought about those little things.” Across narratives, these “little things” were experienced as dignity-affirming demonstrations that counselors understood the rural stakes of disclosure and were actively working to protect students from social exposure.

“Taking Small Steps Doesn’t Mean We Can’t Be Radical”: Supporting Students in the Face of Adversity

This sixth theme, titled from Pasack’s interview, positions rural school counseling as advocacy work conducted under constraint. Participants did not describe rural schools as neutral environments where counselors simply support queer students; they described settings structured by community surveillance, administrative caution, and heteronormative norms that make affirmation risky. Within these conditions, advocacy was not defined only by large-scale programming or public-facing initiatives. Instead, participants emphasized everyday, strategic actions that expand safety and belonging without requiring students to

become publicly outed or placing counselors in direct conflict with hostile community forces. From students' perspectives, effective advocacy reduced uncertainty, protected privacy, and disrupted silence in ways that changed the felt conditions of school life.

Participants suggested that "safe spaces" in rural schools cannot be reduced to visible programs (e.g., GSAs) because formal visibility can itself become vulnerability. G explained that "People would go to the meetings just to be ignorant and bully others," illustrating how inclusion mechanisms can be co-opted as sites of surveillance and harm. Daniel described why this risk feels high-stakes in small communities: "I don't know if I'd want the publicity of going to an LGBTQ club—like, no one knows this thing about me, and now everyone would." As a result, safety was often defined less as a designated public space and more as a protected relationship and private access point. Tomas described this relational form of safety when he noted, "He made sure our sessions were private... all the queer students knew he was the person to go to." Here, the counselor's office becomes a "safe space" through enacted discretion and reputation, not simply through official labels.

Participants also emphasized that trust often begins before a student ever speaks to a counselor; students look for cues that signal whether a counselor is likely to affirm queer identity or reproduce dominant community norms. Yet they made clear that visible allyship in rural schools can provoke backlash that exposes the limits of institutional protection. G recalled, "One of the counselors put a rainbow flag on her door, and it was ripped down. The administration even told her she couldn't put it back up." Even so, participants described symbolic signals as powerful precisely because erasure is common—small cues can serve as low-risk indicators of safety. More importantly, students pushed beyond "hints" toward explicit naming of support. As G explained, "Being visible and saying, 'We support queer students and will help you with anything related to your identity,' was the most effective way." The analytic significance is that visibility is not merely symbolic; it reduces the burden on students to test safety through risky disclosure by making the counseling role and its limits clear.

Finally, participants framed heteronormativity in their schools as a climate of silence that marks queerness as abnormal, unspeakable, or socially dangerous. Daniel explained that queerness "wasn't something people talked about... students, teachers, no one. It was always the other, the weird." Participants emphasized that silence is not neutral; it teaches which identities are considered normal enough to be spoken aloud and which must remain hidden, compounding isolation for rural QTBIPOC youth. Advocacy, therefore, included norm-setting through language—making queer topics speakable in ordinary school discourse. Pasack captured this as both personal and political: "Let's bring it up in conversation. Let's not act like it's a bad word—'queer,' 'gay,' 'homosexual.' Why does it feel like I'm cursing when I say them?" In this framing, "small steps" become radical when they interrupt denial, legitimize queer existence, and create conditions where students can seek support without surrendering privacy or safety.

Discussion

Participant narratives illuminated how rural QTBIPOC students made sense of school counseling and how those meanings shaped access to support related to sexual/affectional, and gender identity. Across cases, barriers were rarely about the absence of counseling services alone; instead, students described a set of school and community conditions that shaped whether counseling felt relevant, safe, and worth the risk. This aligns with scholarship documenting hostile school climates for LGBTQ+ youth and the ways rural contexts can intensify vulnerability through heightened visibility, limited affirming resources, and community conservatism (e.g., Bishop & McClellan, 2016; O'Connell, 2010). What this study adds is a student-centered account of how those conditions are interpreted in real time: students approached counseling as a form of risk management, contingent on cues that disclosure would be met with cultural attunement, affirmation, and confidentiality rather than judgment, minimization, or exposure.

Consistent with literature on counselor role ambiguity (Guzman et al., 2024), participants often understood counseling as primarily academic—an institutional space for scheduling and postsecondary planning rather than social-emotional or identity-related support. In these accounts, heteronormativity operated not only through overt hostility but through silence and vagueness: generic “we’re here if you need us” messaging left students to determine which topics were able to be spoken, inadvertently reinforcing the sense that queer and racialized experiences were outside the counselor’s scope of practice. This finding extends prior work by specifying a mechanism of exclusion that can occur even absent explicit anti-LGBTQ policy—when counseling is publicly framed around what is measurable (grades, schedules), identity-support becomes peripheral.

Participants’ narratives also clarify how intersectional identity shaped what competence meant in practice. Rather than simply preferring identity-matched counselors, students described the burden of education when counselors lacked racial/cultural knowledge or relied on White-centered presumptions of queerness, and they emphasized exhaustion with having to educate helpers about queer and cultural context. These accounts echo intersectionality frameworks that emphasize intertwined systems of racism, heterosexism, and cisnormativity (Crenshaw, 1989), while extending the literature by showing how these systems are encountered as interactional labor in counseling—who has to explain, justify, and make themselves understandable in order to be helped.

Finally, the findings underscore that best practices (e.g. rapport, positive regard, confidentiality, allyship) (Singh et al., 2013) take on distinct meaning in rural schools. Privacy was not a background ethical principle but a prerequisite for help-seeking in tight social networks; students attended closely to “little things” counselors did to prevent inadvertent outing. Likewise, advocacy was framed as context-sensitive and sometimes contested—visible allyship could be powerful, yet vulnerable to backlash (e.g., symbols removed, administrative pushback), which further positions counselors’ everyday actions as consequential “small but radical” interruptions of heteronormative school norms. Taken together, this narrative inquiry extends existing school counseling scholarship by centering rural QTBIPOC students’ theories of safety: trust was socially mediated (via peer “hype”), shaped by counselors’ perceived embeddedness in rural

ideology, and built through repeated demonstrations that identity could be held with discretion and cultural humility.

Implications for Counselor and Counselor Educators

Collectively, the findings point to several implications for rural school counselors. Counselors should make the full range of services socially legible to students by explicitly naming identity-related concerns (e.g., sexuality, gender, discrimination, bullying, belonging, and mental health) rather than relying on vague invitations to seek help; doing so reduces uncertainty and shifts the burden off students to test safety through high-stakes disclosure. Counselors should also treat confidentiality as an active, context-specific practice in rural communities, anticipating visibility risks in when and how sessions occur (e.g., discreet scheduling, attention to door/space/transition practices) to reduce inadvertent outing. To reduce cultural taxation, counselors should pursue ongoing training in culturally responsive and LGBTQ+-affirming practice and avoid default assumptions about identity disclosure that may not align with students' family, cultural, or safety contexts (Bidell, 2017; Hook et al., 2013; Hays, 2022). Finally, because trust was often socially mediated in close-knit settings, counselors can build credibility through consistent follow-through, clear anti-bullying responses, and relationship-building that becomes visible through peer networks. Advocacy should be strategic and context-sensitive—making support visible where possible while also using everyday language and responses to harm to interrupt heteronormative silence and reduce stigma and isolation.

Counselor education programs should prepare future school counselors to translate queer-affirming practice to rural constraints by teaching confidentiality as an enacted, logistical skill (not only an ethical principle) and by explicitly addressing how tight-knit networks shape help-seeking and disclosure. Training should also reduce cultural taxation by strengthening multicultural and LGBTQ+-affirming competence, including culturally situated understandings of disclosure and identity development that move beyond White-centered “coming out” scripts (Bidell, 2017; Hays, 2022; Hook et al., 2013).

Limitations and Future Research

With all narrative inquiry it must be noted that the findings of this study are contextually bound and are not intended to be generalized beyond the participants' lived experiences. Recruitment for the study proved challenging considering the politicized nature of the research topic and the participant identities. Resultantly, we chose to engage with participants who were non-minors and removed temporally from the experience. Because this study draws on retrospective accounts from recent graduates, participants' narratives reflect meaning-making shaped by developmental maturation and time since high school. Recruitment through LGBTQ+ centers, social media, identity-based undergraduate organizations, and participant networks may have increased the likelihood of reaching young adults who were connected to postsecondary or identity-affirming communities. As such, the narratives represented here may not reflect the experiences of rural QTBIPOC young adults who are less connected to LGBTQ+ networks, do not

pursue postsecondary education, have limited access to affirming resources, or remain less able or willing to disclose their identities.

Future work might include contemporaneous student perspectives, counselor perspectives, and school-level policy or climate data to examine how perceptions form over time and how advocacy strategies function within varying rural contexts. Finally, while I engaged in reflexivity and bias-bracketing throughout the analytic process, my own positionality as a queer Indigenous scholar and former rural counselor inevitably shaped interpretation—a feature both enriching and delimiting within narrative inquiry.

Conclusion

This narrative inquiry underscores that rural QTBIPOC students' use of school counseling is shaped by interpretations of safety within a context marked by close-knit visibility, conservative community norms, and institutional role ambiguity. Across stories, counseling was often experienced as academically coded and therefore ill-defined as a place for identity-related support, contributing to delay and disengagement even when services technically existed. At the same time, participants identified concrete practices that can interrupt heteronormative silence and reduce risk—particularly when counselors explicitly name identity-related support, practice confidentiality as an active strategy for maintaining privacy, and signal competence so students are not forced to test safety through high-stakes disclosure. These findings illuminate a need to be intentional in the delineation and implementation of queer-affirming services in rural schools.

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About the Author

Harley Locklear, Ph.D., LCMHCA, LSC, NCC, is an assistant professor of counselor education at Virginia Tech. His research focuses on marginalized communities within rural education, with particular attention to queer, trans, and BIPOC populations.

Four-Day School Week Adoption: The Case of Texas

Neng Priyanti, *University of Houston*

Fiza Mairaj, *University of Houston*

Toni Templeton, *University of Houston*

The four-day school week (4DSW) has been gaining popularity across the nation, most often adopted in rural areas, as is the case in Texas. As an important first step in understanding the student and teacher outcomes associated with 4DSW adoption in such a wide and varied state, this paper explores the various approaches to 4DSW adoption and the ways in which they vary. We begin by documenting the extent of 4DSW adoption in Texas through collecting and qualitatively analyzing school calendars. We then create a dataset of 4DSW school districts to explore the demographic makeup of the districts adopting 4DSW over time. Our findings suggest that two typologies of 4DSW have emerged in Texas, full 4DSW and hybrid 4DSW, and a vast majority of 4DSW school districts predominantly utilize their off days for teacher-centered activities, such as professional development (PD) and additional planning time. We also find that a large proportion of 4DSW school districts are primarily rural and small, have a higher proportion of White students and lower proportions of students of color and English learners compared to the statewide averages. The paper brings forth the nuances in 4DSW adoption and discusses future work necessary to explore such policy adoption in small and rural school districts.

Keywords: Four-day school week, school calendar, rural schools

Adoption of the 4DSW has gained traction as a potential solution to various educational challenges (Thompson et al., 2021). Especially popular among rural school districts, more than 1,600 schools across 24 states had adopted the 4DSW model as of 2021 (Thompson et al., 2022). In Texas, the shift toward 4DSWs began with the introduction of two bills passed in 2015 - House Bill (HB) 2610 and HB 1842 (84th Texas Legislature, 2015). Specifically, House Bill 2610 changed the instructional time requirement from a day-based to a minute-based system and set the minimum instructional minutes requirement to 75,600 per academic year. HB 1842 introduced the District of Innovation (DOI) program which allows eligible school districts to gain exemptions from certain state requirements that charter schools are not subject to follow. The flexibility afforded by allowing school districts to count instructional time in minutes rather than days and by providing waivers for certain statutory requirements paved the way for adopting innovations such as the 4DSW.

Research posits that school districts commonly point to three motivations driving 4DSW adoption: reducing operational costs, enhancing student attendance, and boosting teacher recruitment and retention

(Kilburn et al., 2021; Nowak et al., 2023; Thompson, 2021; Thompson & Ward, 2022). However, as of this writing, empirical studies have not found 4DSW adoption to consistently deliver these outcomes. For example, 4DSW adoption has been shown to reduce expenses by only a small margin (Griffith, 2011; Kilburn et al., 2021) while simultaneously reducing federal revenue (Morton, 2021). The majority of studies have found no significant association between 4DSW adoption and student absenteeism (Kilburn et al., 2021; Morton, 2023; Thompson et al., 2022), and a recent Arkansas study that did show an improvement in attendance after 4DSW adoption noted that the improvements declined over time (Barnes & McKenzie, 2024). Research findings exploring 4DSW adoption and teacher retention are mixed and caution against the adoption of 4DSW to improve teacher retention. Studies have demonstrated a wide variety of associations between 4DSW and teacher retention, including 4DSW adoption has no significant effects on teacher retention (Maiden et al., 2020), a negative effect (Ainsworth et al., 2024; Nowak et al., 2023), and modest positive effects (Camp, 2024; Camp et al., 2024). While 4DSW has been associated with increased teacher recruitment in rural districts in Missouri, statewide analysis shows no significant overall effect (Manion & Varkey, 2021).

Although the adoption of 4DSW is not typically driven by the goal of improving academic outcomes, the extended instructional time per day and the loss of one instructional day each week are likely to influence student outcomes. Several studies have explored these effects and reported a range of findings from no detectable effects (Daly & Richburg, 1984; Morton, 2021, 2023), positive effects (Anderson & Walker, 2015), and negative effects (Kilburn et al., 2021; Thompson, 2021; Thompson et al., 2023; Thompson & Ward, 2022). Despite the growing evidence on the effects of 4DSW, less is known about the nuances of 4DSW adoption or how districts implement the model. In this paper, we explore the extent to which 4DSWs have been adopted in Texas and suggest how future research is needed to better understand the differences in structure of 4DSW observed in school calendars.

As of the 2024-2025 school year, media outlets reported that approximately 103 school districts in Texas have adopted 4DSW (Adams, 2024). Since the Texas Education Agency (TEA) does not collect data regarding 4DSW adoption, conducting longitudinal research to understand the widespread adoption of 4DSW in Texas and the related outcomes has been challenging. To fill this gap in the literature and as a first step to ultimately understanding how the implementation of 4DSW shapes student, teacher, and school outcomes, this study aims to document the adoption of 4DSW in Texas and explore nuances among different types of 4DSW adopted. We began with a document analysis of the school calendars that Texas school districts post online. Then, information from school calendars was combined with publicly available school demographic data in order to answer the two research questions guiding our study:

1. To what extent have Texas school districts adopted 4DSWs, and how do the structures of 4DSW calendars vary?
2. What are the demographic and geographic characteristics of school districts adopting the 4DSW calendars in Texas?

Employing document analysis of school calendars from districts implementing 4DSW and state enrollment data, we first explore the extent of 4DSW adoption and nuance among 4DSW implementation. Then, we create a dataset that allows for descriptive analysis of the geographic and demographic characteristics of 4DSW districts. Our findings point to two main typologies of 4DSW calendars being adopted in Texas: full 4DSW and hybrid/modified 4DSW. We find that a larger proportion of 4DSW districts are rural, serve a smaller proportion of English Learners and students of color than traditional public schools statewide, and dedicate additional time to teacher-centered activities on the fifth day.

Background of 4DSW policy

Over the last five decades, state legislatures have gradually given school districts more operational flexibility, particularly during economic downturns such as the energy crisis in the 1970s and the 2008 Great Recession (Anderson & Walker, 2015). State legislatures have provided operational flexibility to school districts by allowing them to waive minimum instructional time requirements altogether (Thompson et al., 2021) and an opportunity for unconventional schedules by converting the minimum instructional time requirements from a particular number of days to a particular number of hours of instruction, such as the requirement in Colorado passed in 1985 (Dam, 2006) or to a particular number of minutes of instruction, such as codified in Texas in 2015 (Texas Education Code § 25.081, 2015).

In 2015, the Texas Legislature introduced and passed House Bill 2610 (84th Texas Legislature, 2015) which changed the instructional time requirement from 180 days to 75,600 minutes. This change allowed school districts more flexibility in creating their calendars and compensating for instructional time lost due to weather or other unforeseen circumstances. Each year, school districts must post their calendars on their websites and submit them to the Texas Education Agency (TEA), demonstrating how the operational minute criteria will be met (Texas Education Data Standards, n.d.). Also in 2015, HB 1842 allows school districts to implement 4DSW: the District of Innovation, a label that exempts eligible school districts from certain state requirements that charter schools are not subject to follow (Texas Education Code, Chapter 12A, n.d.).

School districts with a state accountability rating of A, B, or C are eligible to become a District of Innovation and thus can be deemed exempt from specific provisions of the Texas Education Code, including educator certification, teacher contracts, class size, specific purchasing and contract requirements, first and last day of school, and length of school day. The school district board of trustees oversees and approves (with a two-thirds majority vote) a comprehensive educational plan that outlines the specific innovations to be adopted (Templeton et al., 2022). With these flexibilities, school districts in Texas were able to implement 4DSW beginning in the 2016-2017 school year (Anglin, 2021).

Review of Literature

4DSW Implementation

Several versions of the 4DSW have been adopted across the United States. Many schools in the northern parts of the United States have adopted 4DSWs only during winter months to accommodate inclement weather, some schools have 4DSWs every other week so that students attend nine days with a tenth off, and others have 4DSWs each week for the entire school year (Donis-Keller & Silvernail, 2009). Typically, the 4DSW involves closure on Monday or Friday, with longer school days during the rest of the week to meet statutory requirements for instructional time (Kilburn et al., 2021). Despite the increased length of school days, students attending districts with 4DSWs have an average of 85 fewer hours per year than their peers in other districts (Thompson et al., 2021). While some school districts close completely on the fifth day of the week, some use the fifth day for extracurricular activities and sports, others for staff and teacher professional development, and other schools dedicate it to enrichment programs or tutoring for students in need of additional support (Anglum & Park, 2021; Donis-Keller & Silvernail, 2009).

Motivations for 4DSW Adoption

Schools across the nation that have chosen to adopt 4DSW often cite three main reasons for their choice: 1) for cost savings, 2) to improve student attendance, and 3) to increase teacher recruitment and retention (Kilburn et al., 2021; Thompson et al., 2022; Morton et al., 2024). Cost savings have been reported as possible by lowering the number of operational days, which then can lower transportation, utility, and maintenance personnel expenses. These cost savings could be especially beneficial for schools in rural areas and with limited funding due to declining state aid and other factors (Barnes & McKenzie, 2024). Schools also reported issues that often led to decreased attendance as one of the rationales for 4DSW adoption, such as lengthy travel time for school-sponsored athletic events or family/medical appointments. Thus, offering 4DSWs was expected to lower absences as students may be more likely to schedule appointments on the non-school day off, and schools can arrange the extracurricular activities or any other student-centered activities on the non-school day. Another rationale for 4DSW adoption reported was teacher recruitment and retention, as the shorter work week could be more attractive to teachers and allow districts to better compete in a competitive environment (Gottlieb et al., 2024; Nowak et al., 2023; Turner & Uribe-Zarain, 2024)

4DSW Outcomes

On Academic Achievement, Attendance and Disciplinary Incidents

Studies examining the effects of 4DSWs on student academic outcomes have yielded mixed results, with evidence more frequently indicating negative rather than positive results. The earliest known study on the impact of 4DSWs on students' academic outcomes dates back to 1984, when Daly and

Richburg (1984) examined five rural districts in Colorado and found that transitioning to a 4DSW had no impact on student academic performance. Other more recent studies have reported comparable findings. A study conducted by the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education found no statistically significant effects of 4DSWs on the overall achievement of English Language Arts (ELA) and Math (Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2023). In Oklahoma, the 4DSW was found to have no measurable effect on ELA and math scores for students in 3-8 grades (Morton, 2021), nor on high school students' ACT scores (Morton, 2023).

As of this writing, a growing number of empirical studies have identified more negative effects of 4DSWs on academic outcomes. For instance, research has shown that 4DSWs are associated with declines in math and ELA performance among students in grades 3-8 (Nowak et al., 2023; Thompson, 2021; Thompson & Ward, 2022) and math achievement among high school students (Thompson et al., 2022). In examining the long-term effect of 4DSWs on both ELA and math achievement, Kilburn et al (2021) found a persistent negative trend, indicating that learning losses may accumulate up to eight years after the adoption. Thompson et al (2023) found minimal overall differences in academic performance between students in 4DSW and five-day school week settings. The researchers, however, identified negative effects among certain subgroups, particularly students who had scored above the median on kindergarten assessments (Thompson et al, 2023). Anderson and Walker (2015) identified a positive relationship between 4DSW and elementary students' performance in reading and math. While qualitative studies have frequently reported perceived benefits of the 4DSW on student outcomes (Kilburn et al., 2021; Turner et al., 2019; Turner et al., 2017), empirical evidence supporting its positive academic impact remains limited (Anderson & Walker, 2015).

Studies have also examined the relationship between 4DSWs and student attendance. In Missouri, the adoption of 4DSWs was not associated with any significant change in overall student attendance, while in Arkansas, a more recent adopter, modest significant improvement in attendance following the implementation of 4DSWs was found (Barnes & McKenzie, 2024). However, these improvements tend to decline over time, which seems to suggest that the impact of 4DSWs on attendance may subside as the novelty of the 4DSW model wains. Similar patterns were observed in other contexts, such as in Oklahoma (Morton, 2023) and Oregon (Thompson et al., 2022), which reported no detectable effects of 4DSWs on student attendance. Additionally, a mixed-methods study by Kilburn et al. (2021) found no statistically significant difference in absenteeism between students on a 4DSW and five-day school week schedule. Additionally, evidence on the impact of 4DSWs on disciplinary incidents has been limited and conflicting. A study in Colorado, for example, suggests that the adoption of 4DSWs is associated with an increase in juvenile crime by almost 20% (Fischer & Argyle, 2018). A more recent study, however, reported that 4DSWs led to notable reductions in disciplinary incidents by approximately 39% for bullying incidents and 31% for fighting incidents (Morton, 2023).

On Teacher and Staff Outcomes

Research exploring the impact of 4DSWs on teacher retention and recruitment has also produced mixed results. Some studies have found no significant impact on teacher retention (Maiden et al., 2020a) while others reported a negative effect (Ainsworth, et al., 2024; Nowak et al., 2023). Other studies, however, reported a modest positive effect of 4DSWs on teacher recruitment (Manion & Varkey, 2021) and teacher retention (Camp, 2024; Camp et al., 2024). Despite these varying findings, each of these studies cautions against using 4DSWs as a strategy to improve teacher retention. Other than the impact of 4DSWs on teacher retention, studies have also explored the relationship between 4DSWs and other associated outcomes. Some studies assert the positive influence of 4DSWs on morale, quality, and content of classroom instruction (Kilburn et al., 2021; Plucker et al., 2012; Turner et al., 2017). Adoption of 4DSWs is also associated with common markers of teacher performance – the teachers at 4DSW schools are 5.9 percentage points more likely to hold an advanced degree than new hires in nearby schools (Camp, 2024).

On Finances

The evidence to support the cost savings of 4DSW remains limited, and many studies caution against the adoption for purely financial purposes (Griffith, 2011; Morton, 2021). For example, although some estimate potential savings of up to 5.4%, the actual savings are often lower, especially for smaller districts (Griffith, 2011). Other reported savings generally range between 4% and 12% and primarily come from cost reductions in transportation and food, as well as decreased spending on substitute teachers and hourly employees (Kilburn et al., 2021). Morton (2021) found that 4DSW led to reductions in non-instructional per-pupil expenditures by approximately 2.03% of the average district budget while at the same time reducing the district's average federal revenue by 5.62%.

Summary of 4DSW Outcomes

These existing studies, taken together, paint a far-tempered picture of 4DSW. Cost savings are modest at best. Evidence on teacher recruitment and retention is mixed but not harmful, and evidence on attendance is found to be neither positive nor negative. When compared to their initial motivations for adoption, the 4DSW does not appear to be a transformative intervention. Furthermore, studies have reported concerning findings on the impact of 4DSW on student outcomes. These mixed findings on the outcomes of 4DSW suggest that 4DSW does not offer a clear advantage over the traditional five-day school week and questions remain about the impact of 4DSWs on student academic achievement. Thus, it seems more useful to view 4DSW as a context-dependent approach that works variably, rather than as an evidence-backed practice.

Data and Methods

Data

Due to the absence of official statewide data on 4DSW districts, we first conducted an identification of districts adopting the 4DSW model by reviewing all calendars posted on the websites of the 1,021 independent school districts listed in the Texas Education Directory.¹ School calendars for all available school years were downloaded along with other relevant documents tied to the 4DSW adoption, such as parent and caregiver 4DSW surveys and teacher recruitment flyers. This initial exploration resulted in the identification of 190 districts that were initially identified as 4DSW school districts as of 2024-2025. This initial list was then reviewed and cross-validated among researchers and resulted in a final list of 185 districts. To explore how 4DSW calendars are structured, we focused on the 2024-2025 school calendars, coding them for total daily instructional minutes, and how the fifth day off is used for both teacher and student-centered activities.

To explore the demographic and geographic characteristics of the adopting 4DSW districts, we combined our final 185 4DSW districts dataset with publicly available demographic and administrative data from the Texas Education Agency (TEA) and the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) for the 2017-2018 through 2024-2025 academic year to create a panel dataset. District-level data included the geographic locale² and the proportion of student enrollment by race and ethnicity, socio-economic status, English language learner status, and students served in the special education program.

Methods

We utilized qualitative document analysis to analyze the 2024-2025 school calendars of the adopting 4DSW in Texas and to explore the various ways school districts structure their off days (Bowen, 2009). By utilizing document analysis, we aimed to discover the themes and patterns within our data beyond the numerical frequencies (Altheide et al., 2008). We inductively coded the school calendars on the duration of the 4DSWs in a school year, instructional minutes per day, and frequency and duration reserved on the fifth day for teacher-centered activities (e.g., professional development, workday, collaborative planning) and student-centered activities (e.g., tutorials/intervention). To ensure credibility, we engaged in investigator triangulation by comparative analyses of researchers' codes and related findings and engaged in multiple collaborative discussions (Stahl & King, 2020). After the codes were created, we collated them under 4DSW typologies to characterize the distinctions and nuances of 4DSW calendars.

In the second stage of the coding process, the researchers divided the 185 school districts alphabetically to examine school districts' calendars for the 2024-2025 school year. The codes were generated both inductively and deductively. Bingham and Witkowsky (2022) argue that using both inductive and deductive coding iteratively for data analysis provides a basis for a more organized, rigorous, and

¹<https://tealprod.tea.state.tx.us/tea.askted.web/Forms/Home.aspx>

²<https://nces.ed.gov/programs/edge/Geographic/LocaleBoundaries>

analytically sound study. For example, school calendars were coded for the day of the week taken off, the number of instructional minutes per day, and whether or not the fifth day was reserved for teacher-focused activities. However, as we started to code, other codes, such as the month 4DSW began and ended and whether or not student tutorials were noted on the fifth day were included as patterns were noticed in the school district calendars. As we continued to code, the typologies of 4DSW were discovered. We started coding the two types of 4DSWs separately. The distinction between the two typologies is described below.

The school districts were considered full 4DSW districts if they had the four-day weeks starting at least in September, and lasting until May, with an exception made for the month of April. Generally, the month of April is designated as the standardized testing month in Texas, therefore many school districts had full five-day weeks scheduled in April. With the start of a four-day week in September, almost all consecutive weeks were 4DSW in full 4DSW districts, excluding government-designated holidays. Based on the number of weeks from September to May, with the exception of holiday weeks and weekends, and the month of April, we calculated that a full 4DSW districts would have at least 30 four-day weeks. There were many full 4DSW districts with more than 30 four-day weeks, as some began 4DSWs in August and some had four-day weeks in April as well. The hybrid/modified 4DSWs were easier to identify, as many started their 4DSWs in the spring semester. Others would start their 4DSW mid-fall and end in mid-spring. Furthermore, some hybrid/modified 4DSW districts had every alternate week as a four-day week throughout the school year, therefore, the count of four-day weeks was always well below 30 weeks.

Importantly, the researchers paid close attention to how each school district coded their calendars for four-day weeks, versus other kinds of days off, excluding public holidays. For instance, many school districts across the typologies labeled teacher in-service/professional development days/teacher workdays, which were recurring on the fifth-off day and planned around the four-day week policy, differently from other professional development/in-service days, which were planned to fulfill other state-level requirements. Hence, for a full 4DSW district, even excluding the weeks with other professional development/in-service days would result in thirty plus 4DSW, and a hybrid/modified 4DSW will be under 30 weeks of 4DSW. The researchers also did not count weeks with half-instructional days as a four-day week because, as a half day is not an off day. After the first round of coding was completed independently by each researcher, the researchers exchanged their notes and codes. After the discussion, a final list of codes emerged, against which all school districts were coded again.

The final list of codes included typology, instructional minutes, day off, PD/in-service, and tutorials, and resulted in 147 full 4DSW and 38 Hybrid/modified 4DSW. Once coding was completed for all 4DSW school districts, we combined codes with the panel dataset created using publicly available directory and demographic data and summarized characteristics of each type of 4DSW district. Using school calendars and publicly available data does create some limitations in our analysis. First, school districts could host activities throughout the school year that are not reflected on the school calendar or could make changes throughout the school year that alter the school calendar. Second, we use the classifications and descriptions provided by school district calendars to code the typologies and the use of the day off, which

can omit nuance in our understanding of 4DSW structure. Finally, publicly available data is captured as a snapshot of school districts at one point (Fall) during the school year and does not reflect changes the districts undergo throughout the school year. Though our analysis is limited in these ways, a first look of 4DSW adoption can be provided with confidence using these data and future research can provide more nuance of the 4DSW school districts operations and implementation. The following section details the types of 4DSW district adopted across the state and reports the demographic characteristics of those school districts.

Findings

This study aimed to explore the extent to which 4DSW has been adopted across Texas and to describe the demographic and geographic characteristics of 4DSW school districts in Texas. The findings section begins with qualitative findings on the adopting 4DSW districts, their typologies, and the ways districts utilize their off days. It then follows with the description of the demographic and geographic characteristics of the adopting 4DSW districts.

Typology

We observed different approaches among districts in implementing the 4DSW calendar. In our attempt to code the utilization of off days, we also coded the instructional time per day of each 4DSW district and the way they structured their 4DSW calendar. We found two main typologies of 4DSW being implemented in Texas: full 4DSW and hybrid/modified 4DSW. The majority (79.5%, 147 districts) of 4DSW adopt the 'full 4DSW' model – they start their four-day week in late August or September and continue until late April or May. Other districts (20.5%, 38 districts) adopt a slightly different structure. Some districts limit the four-day week to a single semester (Fall or Spring), while others fluctuate the 4DSWs and the fifth day off throughout the year – these are called a 'hybrid/modified 4DSW' model. Districts adopting the full 4DSW model tend to have longer school hours, from 470 minutes to 530 minutes per day, or an average of 502.7 minutes per day. This means that school hours are increased by at least 50 minutes to 110 minutes per day, compared to the daily instructional minutes at five-day school week districts. Districts adopting the hybrid model have relatively shorter school hours at around 460 to 515 minutes or an average of 487.5 minutes per day, meaning that they extend their instructional time by 40 to 95 minutes per day. Table 1 shows that most of Texas school districts follow a full 4DSW model, with daily instructional time ranging from 460 to 530 minutes.

Table 1*Schedule structure of 4DSW in Texas, 2024-25*

Typology	4DSW Districts (<i>n</i>)	% of 4DSW Districts	Instructional mins. (min.)	Instructional mins. (max.)	Instructional mins. (avg.)	Instructional mins. (<i>SD</i>)
Full 4DSW	147	79.46%	470	530	502.71	11.14
Hybrid/Modified	38	20.54%	460	515	487.50	14.88
Grand Total	185	1	460	530	499.58	13.45

Source: National Center for Education Statistics and UH ERC primary data collection and analysis.

Note: The average extended minutes per day is calculated by subtracting 420 minutes of instruction from the average institutional minutes.

Utilization of the Fifth Day

As with typology, we also identified patterns in how 4DSW school districts use their off days to improve teacher, student, and school outcomes. As shown in Table 2, our comprehensive analysis of school calendars revealed that 92.4% of school districts implementing 4DSWs reserved the fifth non-school day for teacher-centered activities such as professional development, in-service training, collaborative planning, or individual workdays. Many of these school districts, 70.8% (131 districts), plan teacher-centered activities regularly, such as all off-days (1.08%, two districts), once a month (61.1%, 113 districts), once to twice a month (5.9%, 11 districts), or twice a month (2.7%, five districts). Another 21.6% of 4DSW school districts have a flexible approach to scheduling their teacher-centered activities. These districts tend to have fewer days allocated for teachers/staff on the off days, varying between one day to six days a year, and are planned throughout the year. Additionally, a small percentage of 4DSW school districts (7.6%, 14 school districts) do not allocate any of the fifth day off for teacher/staff-focused activities on their calendars.

Table 2*Fifth-Day Usage among 4DSW School Districts*

Professional Development and Planning	4DSW School Districts	Percentage of 4DSW School Districts
None	14	7.6%
Irregularly Scheduled	40	21.6%
Regularly Scheduled	131	70.8%
All off days	2	1.08%
Once a month	113	61.1%
Once to twice a month	11	5.9%
Twice a month	5	2.7%
Total	185	100%

Source: UH ERC primary data collection and analysis.

We also examined how 4DSW school districts structure their schedules to support students academically. As shown in Table 3, most school districts operating the 4DSW model (83.8%, 155 districts) offer no academic support for students on their off days. The remaining percentage (15.7%, 29 school districts) offer services for some students on some off days, with variations in the timing and duration of the services and the student population being served. Some 4DSW school districts reserve this tutorial time for selected students, typically for students at-risk of dropping out or those seeking extra help to enhance their curriculum. Of this percentage, 8.1% or 15 4DSW school districts provide their tutorials more regularly, such as once a month or twice a month, with variations on the durations of the tutorials (full day or half day). Another 7.6% (14 districts) have a more flexible tutorial schedule and offer relatively fewer tutorials, typically fewer than five off days in the 2024-2025 academic year. In addition to those academic services, one 4DSW school district provides a paid childcare option on the off days.

Table 3*Fifth-day Services Provided by 4DSW School Districts*

Student Tutorials and Enrichment	4DSW School Districts	Percentage of 4DSW School Districts
None	155	83.8%
Irregular/Fewer	14	7.6%
Regular	15	8.1%
Once a month	8	4.3%
Once a month/half day	1	0.5%
Twice a month	4	2.2%
Twice a month/half day	2	1.1%
Paid Childcare option	1	0.5%
Total	185	100.00%

Note: The professional development and planning, student tutorials, and enrichment included here are limited to those conducted on the designated off days.

Demographic and Geographic Characteristics of Texas 4DSW School Districts

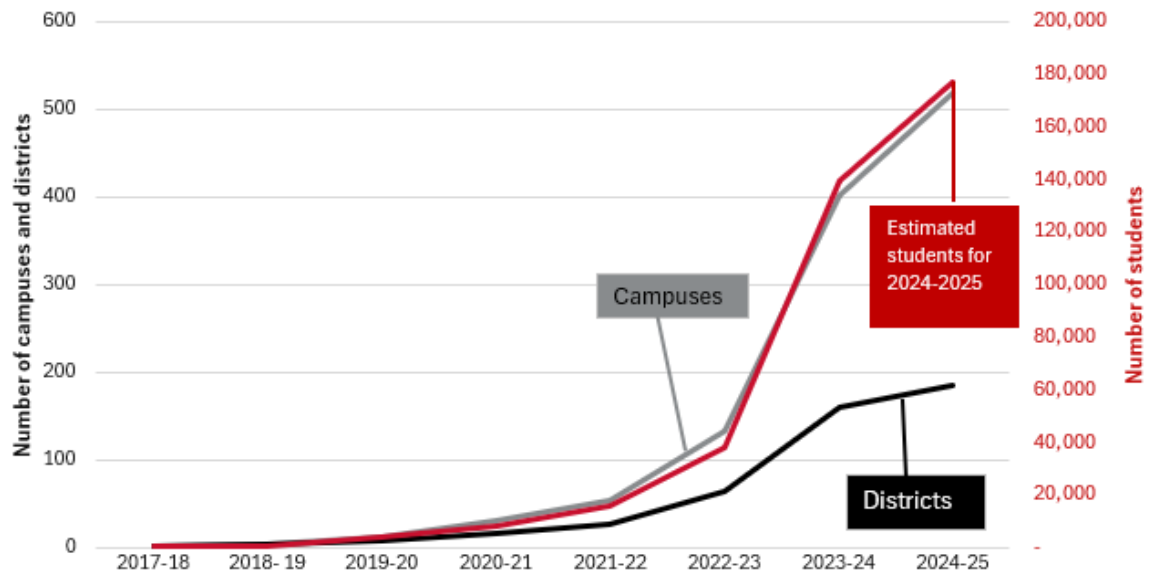
Our examination of the school calendars of 1,021 independent school districts across Texas showed that, as of the 2024-2025 academic year, 185 districts with 519 campuses serving 139,486 students adopted 4DSWs. Figure 1 demonstrates how the number of school districts adopting 4DSWs grew quite substantially from just two districts with two schools serving 244 students in 2018 to 185 school districts with 519 schools, serving more than 170,000 students³ in 2024-25. From the 2017-2018 to 2021-2022 school year, the 4DSW adoption was slow, with only one district adopting 4DSWs in 2018-19, five in 2019-

³ At the time of this report, enrollment figures for 2024-25 had not yet been released.

20, eight in 2020-21, and an additional eleven districts in 2021-22. The peak of 4DSW adoption occurred in the 2023-24 school year when an additional 95 school districts with 270 schools serving 101,320 students adopted 4DSWs for the first time.

Figure 1

Increases in 4DSW Adoption by Districts, Campuses, and Students, 2017-18 through 2024-25



Source: Texas Education Agency publicly available data and UH ERC primary data collection and analysis.

Notes: Districts, campuses, and students enrolled as of last Friday in October (snapshot date), as reported in Texas Academic Performance Reports. Student enrollment for 2024-25 was not released at the time of publication of this report.

Table 4 shows the numerical trends reflecting 4DSW adoption. While at the time of this publication, the student enrollment data had not been published, an additional 25 school districts adopted 4DSWs in the 2024-25 school year. During the 2023-24 school year, those districts served 37,720 students, which would put the estimated total number of students in a 4DSW in 2024-25 at more than 170,000.

Table 4*4DSW Adoption by Districts, Campuses, and Students, 2017-18 through 2024-25*

Counts per School Year	2017–18	2018–19	2019–20	2020–21	2021–22	2022–23	2023–24	2024–25
Districts	2	3	8	16	27	65	160	185
Campuses	2	3	13	30	54	132	402	519
Students	244	329	4,131	8,387	15,795	38,166	139,486	Not applicable

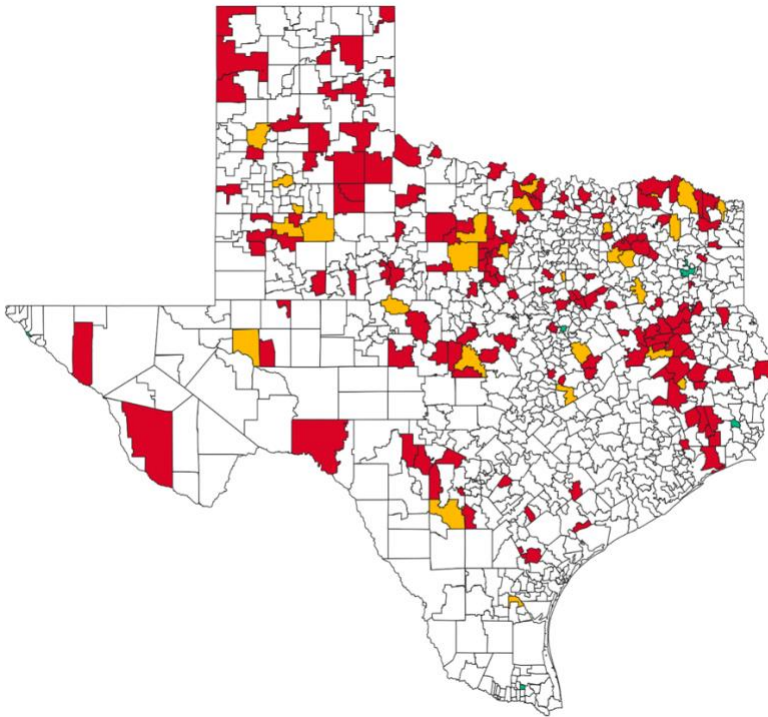
Source: Texas Education Agency publicly available data and UH ERC primary data collection and analysis.

Notes: Districts, campuses, and students enrolled as of last Friday in October (snapshot date), as reported in Texas Academic Performance Reports. Student enrollment for 2024-25 was not released at the time of publication of this report.

In Figure 2, a map of Texas school districts displays the 4DSW school districts color-coded by the geographic locale. Rural school districts (red) are the most common school districts to adopt 4DSWs, followed by town school districts (yellow) and suburban school districts (green). Notably, 4DSWs have been adopted across every major region of the state.

Figure 2

Map of Texas Four-Day School Week School Districts by Locale as of 2024-25



Note: Locales in red are rural. Locales in green are suburban. Locales in yellow are towns.

Source: National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) publicly available data and UH ERC primary data collection and analysis.

Table 5 shows the distribution of 4DSW districts across the state as of the 2023-24 school year, the latest year available for the school enrollment numbers. The largest number of districts, campuses, and students are in rural areas of Texas: 88,190 students served in 288 campuses and 132 districts. The locale with the second largest number of 4DSW school districts was towns, which NCES defines as a territory inside an urban cluster. In 2023, 40,884 students were served in 93 campuses and 24 school districts in towns. Finally, four school districts adopted 4DSW in suburban areas, with 21 campuses serving 10,412 students as of the 2023-24 school year.

Table 5

Count of Four-Day School Week Districts, Campuses, and Students by Locale, 2023-24

Locale	Districts	Campuses	Students
Rural	132	288	88,190
Suburban	4	21	10,412
Town	24	93	40,884
Total	160	402	139,486

Source: Texas Education Agency publicly available data and UH ERC primary data collection and analysis.

Notes: Districts, campuses, and students enrolled as of last Friday in October (snapshot date), as reported in Texas Academic Performance Reports.

Table 6 shows the demographics of the 4DSW districts by race, ethnicity, and locale based upon the latest data available at the time of this report, data from the 2023-24 school year. School districts that adopted the 4DSW served a majority White student population. The average 4DSW district served 55.5% White students, 34.4% Hispanic students, 5.7% students who identified as another race or ethnicity, and 4.1% Black students. School districts in rural settings that adopted 4DSW served on average, a student population that was more White (59.2%) than 4DSW school districts located in towns (40.4%). In 2023-24, four school districts in a Suburban setting adopted 4DSW, and they served more Hispanic students (61.9%). Table 6 also shows that 4DSW districts in different regions serve very different student populations.

Table 6

Average Student Race/Ethnicity Served in 4DSW by Locale, 2023-2024

Locale	Another Race or Ethnicity	Black	Hispanic	White
Rural	4.3%	5.06%	31.4%	59.2%
Suburban	2.7%	9.3%	61.9%	26.1%
Town	4.6%	8.9%	46.1%	40.4%
Total	4.4%	5.7 %	34.4%	55.5%

Source: Texas Education Agency publicly available data and UH ERC primary data collection and analysis.

Notes: Student program participation is calculated as an average percentage of students served in districts, as reported in the 2024 Texas Academic Performance Reports.

Table 7 shows the distribution of 4DSW students by socioeconomic status, special education, and English proficiency based on the latest data available at the time of this report, data from the 2023-24 school year. In 4DSW districts, an average of 63% of students were classified as economically disadvantaged, an average of 15.8% received special education services, and an average of 8.8% had limited English proficiency. The average percentages of students receiving special education services and students classified as having limited English proficiency vary greatly within different locales, highlighting the variation in student populations served in each region.

Table 7

Average Percentage of Economically Disadvantaged, Special Education, and Limited English Proficient Students Served in 4DSW by Locale, 2023-24

Locale	Economically Disadvantaged	Special Education	Limited English Proficient
Rural	61.2%	15.9%	7.1%
Suburban	75.6%	14.9%	24.9%
Town	70.9%	15.6%	15.4%
Total	63%	15.8%	8.8%

Source: Texas Education Agency publicly available data and UH ERC primary data collection and analysis.

Notes: Student program participation is calculated as the average percentage of students served in districts, as reported in the 2024 Texas Academic Performance Reports.

Overall, our descriptive analysis of 4DSW reveals that 4DSW districts are primarily rural and small-sized, a trend also shared in other states (Barnes & McKenzie, 2023; Manion & Varkey, 2021; Thompson et al., 2022). Additionally, 4DSW districts represent a diverse population whereabout 63% come from low socio-economic backgrounds, 8.8% have limited English proficiency, 5.7% of the students identify as Black or African American, 34.4% as Hispanic/Latino, and 55.5% identify as White. However, if we compare the 4DSW student populations to the state-wide student populations, we find that 4DSW school districts have a higher proportion of economically disadvantaged students (63% vs. 61.2% statewide), smaller proportion of English learners (8.8% vs. 26.6%) and higher proportions of students who identify as White (55.5% vs. 26.7% statewide) (Templeton et al., 2024). Statewide, Hispanic/Latino students make up the highest majority at 52%, and about 12.5% of students identify as Black. Contrastingly, in the 4DSW districts, the largest proportion of students identify as White at 55.5%, and Black students make up about 5.7% of all students. This is an interesting finding as it suggests that the school districts adopting 4DSW calendars are predominantly located in rural areas, are more White, and serve a lower proportion of students of color compared with the statewide averages.

Discussion and Implications

This research examines the adoption of 4DSWs in Texas and explores the nuances of 4DSW schedules and the demographic characteristics of districts that have adopted the model. We found that the majority of school districts adopting the model are located in rural areas and, when compared to school districts statewide, have a larger proportion of White students and lower proportions of limited English proficient students and students of color. Our qualitative analysis of school calendars reveals that the model seems to be more teacher-centered, evidenced by the notable difference in the number of districts offering planned teacher-centered activities (92.8%) as compared to the student-centered activities (15.5%) on the fifth day. Furthermore, we find that while most school districts had a full 4DSW calendar (79.4%), which means that more than 30 weeks in the academic calendar were four-day weeks, a significant number of school districts (20.5%) had hybrid/modified 4DSW calendars. These findings are critical to future evaluations of 4DSW districts. This evidence informs future research, as the outcomes of students and teachers in 4DSW districts can ostensibly vary greatly depending on how 4DSW calendars are structured, how the 4DSW districts choose to utilize the day off, and the populations being served by the school district.

Although the literature on 4DSWs across the nation mentions several goals that are driving the increasing adoption of 4DSW, our review of school calendars suggest that adoption could largely be driven by the motivation to improve teacher recruitment and retention. This assumption is supported by the significant number of rural districts that have adopted 4DSWs (rural schools in Texas have reported larger teacher shortages), with a larger proportion focusing on providing planned professional development and planning for teachers rather than direct interventions for students on the fifth day. Additionally, the 4DSW schedule implementation further suggests that one of its primary goals could be to improve teacher working conditions by providing additional planning time, additional time off, and additional support to teachers. A recent examination of Texas teacher workforce trends across the last decade suggests that, compared to a decade ago, the Texas teacher workforce has less pre-classroom preparation and fewer standard teacher certifications, teaches courses across more subjects, earns less, and is more likely to leave the classroom for a different career (Templeton et al., 2024). Given the increasingly precarious working conditions for teachers across Texas and limited preparation and certification of the workforce, a four-day workweek may act as an incentive for teachers to join smaller and more rural school districts, where teacher shortages are greatest, and provide additional support and training for those with no certification or little preparation (Showalter et al., 2019; Gottlieb et al., 2024; Nowak et al., 2023; Turner & Uribe-Zarain, 2024).

Studies have shown that the impact of 4DSW on teacher recruitment and retention has yielded mixed results (Ainsworth et al., 2024; Camp, 2024; Maiden et al., 2020; Manion & Varkey, 2021; Nowak et al., 2023). However, it is also found that 4DSW positively influences teachers' morale, the quality and content of classroom instruction (Kilburn et al., 2021; Plucker et al., 2012; Turner et al., 2017). A recent study indicates that 4DSW is linked to higher quality teachers, with 4DSW schools having a 5.9 percentage point greater likelihood of hiring teachers with advanced degrees (master's or higher) compared to new hires in schools located at least 25 kilometers from a 4DSW school (Camp, 2024). Additionally, media

outlets in Texas have reported that school districts in Texas adopted 4DSW to recruit and retain highly qualified teachers (Adams, 2024). Our findings, which show that the majority of 4DSW districts are located in rural areas and that the majority (92.8%) of school districts reserved their day off for teacher-centered activities, suggest a similar goal – offering a four-day workweek may help recruit and retain highly qualified teachers in these districts. Future research is needed to explore the motivations and goals associated with the adoption of 4DSW models, as the activities and resources dedicated to those goals will drive outcomes (W. K. Kellogg Foundation, 2004).

The growing adoption of the 4DSW model in Texas is both exciting and concerning. On one hand, 4DSWs seem to be serving as a solution to address teacher shortages in Texas by offering to improve teacher working conditions and attracting teachers to rural and small districts. On the other hand, the broader implications of 4DSWs remain unclear. Evidence suggests that the effects on student academic performance tend to be negative, the influence on teacher recruitment and retention is mixed, and the potential cost savings are modest. This research is the first in Texas to examine how 4DSWs are being implemented and thus contributes to the growing literature on 4DSW in Texas and across the U.S. Our study also serves as a guide for policymakers and educators to survey the current variations in 4DSW calendars to better inform future decision-making. Future research on student and teacher outcomes as they relate to 4DSW in other U.S. states may employ a similar approach to first understand the nuances of the 4DSW approaches before evaluating and treating all 4DSW districts on the same scale. Additionally, future research can also examine students' activities on the fifth day when school is not in session for tutorials, as such variations and nuances could significantly impact outcomes and whether childcare concerns are raised regarding the school closure. In this paper, we demonstrate that not all 4DSW districts are similar in their design, the demographics they serve, and perhaps in goals motivating the adoption. Future research informed by this study can provide a more nuanced understanding of 4DSW districts across the nation and more conclusive evidence to support 4DSW adoption.

Conclusion

This study, which focused on exploring the demographic makeup of Texas 4DSW school districts and the various manifestations of the 4DSW schedule, found that districts adopting the 4DSW models are primarily rural, and on average, serve a higher proportion of White students and a lower proportion of limited English proficient students. The varying structures of 4DSWs characterized under two typologies- full vs. hybrid/modified 4DSW- provide caution for future evaluations of 4DSWs by demonstrating that not all 4DSW calendars are similar. Hence, the study of associated outcomes should consider this variety. The consistent use of the off days for planning and professional development suggest that 4DSW adoption is largely motivated by recruiting and retaining teachers. By offering an understanding of the conditions and inputs associated with 4DSW adoption in Texas, our study informs future research that aim to more conclusively explore how 4DSW adoption shapes teacher and student outcomes.

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About the Authors

Neng Priyanti is a doctoral student in Higher Education Leadership and Policy Studies. She serves as a graduate research assistant at the University of Houston's Education Research Center, supporting research projects including studies on the adoption and implementation of the four-day school week in Texas and on Teacher certification.

Fiza Mairaj, Ph.D., is a Research Scientist at the University of Houston's Education Research Center. Her research centers on the longitudinal outcomes of refugee children and youth following resettlement, with a focus on building data that can inform policy-level changes to support their educational integration. She also explores topics in organizational leadership, management, and equity

Toni Templeton, Ph.D., is a Senior Research Scientist at the University of Houston Education Research Center who seeks to influence policy and practice by illuminating inequity in public education system, with particular focus on educational outcomes and school finance.

“I Bet I Could Do That”: Perceptions of Preservice Teachers in a Rural Grow Your Own (GYO) Teacher Education Program

Micaha Dean Hughes, *North Carolina State University*

Maria Coady, *North Carolina State University*

Mary Michaels Estrada, *North Carolina State University*

Jodie Roberson, *North Carolina State University*

Rachel Montesinos Jorro, *North Carolina State University*

School districts across the United States (U.S.) are experiencing persistent teacher shortages. These are especially acute in rural areas, where it is difficult to recruit and retain teachers, especially certified teachers for diverse learners with differentiated needs. Grow Your Own (GYO) programs, where school districts provide support for current students to become teachers, continue to gain popularity in hard-to-staff rural areas. This qualitative case study examined one rural school district's GYO teacher education program through the lens of program participants at the university stage of a six-year GYO commitment. The participants described three critical tensions: their sense of place between home and school, their desire to serve the rural community conflicting with their desire to explore new opportunities, and their sense of responsibility to others in tension with their own self-interests. In analysis of these findings, we offer guidance toward more student-centered GYO programs in teacher education, with particular attention to student recruitment, program structure, and student well-being.

Keywords: teacher recruitment, teacher education, grow your own, rural cultural wealth, spatial justice

Teacher shortages are an ongoing, nationwide problem that limit educational opportunities and outcomes for students, particularly in rural areas (Oyen & Schweinle, 2021). To fill open teaching positions, school districts are developing innovative, homegrown teacher recruitment programs such as scholarship programs and sign-on bonuses to incentivize teachers to join the classroom (Latterman & Steffes, 2017; Nguyen et al., 2022). One area of promise in addressing the rural teacher shortage is the growing movement to establish “Grow Your Own” (GYO) teacher education programs. GYO programs are most simplistically described as pre-college teacher pipeline programs, where middle or high school students are selected or invited to gain field experience, mentorship, and direct instruction prior to entering a college-level teacher education program, with the intention that the participants will return to the school district to teach at “home” after the degree is conferred (Gist, 2022; Rogers-Ard et al., 2019). As many GYO programs offer scholarships or stipend pay in exchange for participation, these programs not only seek to recruit but

retain teachers in the long run. A key determinant of GYO programs is the ability to draw “new, frequently first-generation, underrepresented minority group candidates into the teaching profession,” and therefore the program requirements are commonly developed based on district needs to teach and serve diverse learners (Valenzuela, 2017, p. 4).

In this study, we spent significant time with a small group of participants in one GYO program in Leon County (pseudonym), a rural county with a large school district, which we describe more in detail later in this article. As part of the GYO program requirements, the students represented in this study were asked to leave their rural home – the place they began the GYO program as high school sophomores – to obtain their teaching degrees, which would be partially funded at any in-state institution. In this transition, they found themselves temporarily uprooted and yet still responsible for the development and maintenance of personal relationships turned professional within their rural town. The purpose of this qualitative case study was to better understand the experiences of these GYO participants during the college years of the program, with an aim to inform future GYO program development in a student-centered way. We examined students’ perceptions of the program to answer: (1) How do first-year university students from a rural community in the southeastern United States navigate a grow your own (GYO) teacher education program? and (2) What role does diversity play in how students negotiate their participation in the GYO program?

Homegrown Solutions to a National Problem

Extant literature describes unique challenges that rural schools face in recruiting qualified teachers, including limited professional and social development opportunities for young adults in smaller towns and lower compensation (Calderón et al., 2011; Coady, 2020, 2021; Hartman et al., 2017; Monk, 2007). Since teacher preparation curricula are commonly geospatially-blind, preservice teachers do not learn about critical differences in education policy or practice in rural areas. Failure to address these differences leads to diminished understanding and awareness of rural education strategies, leaving future teachers detached from the realities of rural schools and results in challenges to retention efforts even if recruitment is successful (Green & Letts, 2007).

With these challenges in mind, we consider rural teacher education and recruitment to be issues of spatial justice and educational equity. We problematize rurality as a construct that has been understudied (Thier et al., 2021) and ill-defined, often positioned in a false binary (urban-rural) that threatens resources and investment for rural communities (Eppey, 2015; John & Ford, 2017). For us, rurality encompasses more than physical or geographic space; it reflects a sociocultural network of human relationships to space and land that motivates or demotivates action, emotion, and behavior. Rurality therefore encompasses a community cultural wealth of knowledges, practices, and relationships, and these socioecological assets can be utilized to solve local problems like teacher shortages (Crumb et al., 2023). For example, Hammer et al. (2005) found that GYO programs in rural areas succeeded because, when compared to teachers from other teacher preparation pathways, GYO participants were more likely to want to teach in a rural

community and stay in their teaching position once hired because they felt socially rooted in the community (Reininger, 2012; Schwartzbeck et al., 2003).

Place as an Essential Lens

Students who begin a GYO program as rural high school students and then relocate for college in an urban space undergo significant social and cultural transitions that are grounded in *place*. The financial cost of college for rural, low-income students is a considerable barrier to participation in formal teacher education programs and is also a barrier to in-community rural teacher recruitment (Espinoza et al., 2018). One cost mitigation tool is the development of GYO partnerships between K–12 schools and universities. These partnerships can infuse understanding and funding solutions into these school-university relationships, which can in turn become critical for rural teacher recruitment and preparation due to the high cost of traditional, four-year teacher education programs (Texas Comprehensive Center, 2018). However, GYO programs are typically *contractual*, meaning that students may receive a college scholarship for participation but are expected to work a certain number of years in the rural area upon graduation from the teacher preparation program (Carl & Seelig, 2023). Student participation in a GYO program therefore represents an early investment in a specific career pathway, potentially shaping students' college and career decisions before they have fully explored alternative educational or occupational possibilities (Blazar et al., 2026).

While research on GYO programs has gained traction in recent years as a response to challenges to teacher recruitment nationwide, it is critical to understand the historical motivations behind GYO programs (Oyen & Schweinle, 2021). GYO models date back to at least the 1970s, where educational inequity in K-12 schools motivated community organizers to seek ways to connect culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) communities and the traditionally middle-class, predominantly White teacher workforce (Coffey et al., 2019; Valenzuela, 2017). In the past fifty years, the need to recruit more racially and ethnically diverse teachers has increased, especially as rural communities have experienced pronounced in-migration of primarily immigrant Latine families and diverse youth (Azano et al., 2025; Johnson & Lichter, 2022; Petrin et al., 2014). According to a 2022 report from the U.S. Government Accountability Office, 80% of the K-12 teacher workforce was White in the 2017-2018 school year, highlighting the demographic mismatch between the teacher workforce and the increasingly diverse U.S. student population. In addition to the need for more diverse representation in the teacher workforce, there are well-documented benefits to recruiting diverse teachers, especially in rural areas where students are less likely to encounter non-White teachers (Monk, 2007). Lichtenberger and colleagues (2015) found that new teachers tend to apply to work in schools with high proportions of students from similar demographic backgrounds as themselves.

However, societal perceptions of the qualities that teachers “should” possess and exhibit place limitations on who gains access to the profession and why, resulting in structural inequities embedded into teacher education programs and student entry into them (Burton & Johnson, 2010; Darling-Hammond & Berry, 2006; Hardré, 2008; Will, 2023).

GYO programs offer a promising solution for hard-to-staff rural districts, as the teacher candidates are already accustomed to a rural lifestyle and have community ties. As a recursive investment, school districts that target local high school students provide professional and economic incentive for local youth while securing a promising future workforce (Gist et al., 2019). Harris and colleagues (2010) found that principals looked for teachers who understood the types of students that they served, who were committed to staying in their communities, and who connected with the culture of the school. In that regard, rural community members hold the insider knowledge needed to adeptly navigate local school policies and politics and use that knowledge to educate youth in the community. The juxtaposition of school administrators seeking teachers who understand the students they teach while minoritized teachers struggle to see themselves reflected in many rural students underlines a key disparity in recruiting diverse teachers to predominantly White rural towns and is a primary rationale for this study.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in two theories that challenge stereotypes about rural people, schools, and places by centering community strengths and local resources. These theories have implications for teacher education. *Place matters* in education, both in terms of the structure of how schools are funded and work, as well as who participates in schools and who decides which voices and histories are told (John & Ford, 2017; Schafft, 2016; Tieken, 2014). In critical place-based pedagogy, Gruenewald (2003) describes how rurality intersects with Freirean critical pedagogy, emphasizing that “places themselves have something to say” (Freire, 1970, p. 624). Critical pedagogy of place illuminates how the cultural, economic, social, and political context of a place shapes the people who inhabit it; and people, in turn, shape the place they inhabit. This theory also captures how power and influence are systematized in rural communities and how, despite persistent under-resourcing, rural areas function by building upon existing strengths and knowledges within the community.

In the context of teacher education, place and rurality have not been consistently treated as essential equity issues, even in a state like North Carolina, where more than 75% of the school districts are considered rural following local classification codes from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020; Public Schools First North Carolina, 2025). For instance, in their review of rural teacher education, Reagan et al. (2019) synthesized 59 articles that spanned the decade between 2007 and 2017. They noted two themes across the literature: how place matters in rural teacher education, and operationalizing place for teacher education programs. With respect to the former, when place is not considered specifically in teacher education, educators are under-prepared

to meet the needs of students; however, simply having exposure to rural communities is insufficient to prepare educators for rural schools. In the second theme, the scholars noted that coursework could begin to address rural school challenges and strengths but was not enough to meet the needs of diverse subpopulations such as English learners. Recent research (Coady et al., 2023; Golombek et al., 2022) suggests that field experiences and direct connections with rural underserved students and families can mitigate these oversights in teacher education when place and equity are centered in teacher education programs.

Gruenewald's (2003) critical pedagogy of place and Crumb et al.'s (2023) work on rural cultural wealth provide a theoretical foundation where the process of rural students becoming teachers for the purpose of serving their communities can be interpreted as acts of liberation and revolution. The rural cultural wealth framework, built upon Yosso's (2005) conceptualization of community cultural wealth, has four dimensions: rural resourcefulness, rural ingenuity, rural community unity, and rural familism (Crumb et al., 2023). *Rural resourcefulness* refers to the way that people in rural communities take actionable steps to alleviate constraints that limit their ability to succeed or live well. *Rural ingenuity* remarks on how rural inhabitants transform shared community knowledge into creative responses to challenges to overcome difficulties. In both familial capital and rural familism, people feel an innate sense of belonging within a sociocultural context built on interpersonal relationships, primarily within kinship networks but occasionally with extended family, which Crumb et al. (2023) include as "extended kin" (p. 6). Kin networks are instrumental for *collective care*, where family networks in rural communities are created and used to care for others, which serves as "protection against oppression and adversity" by providing people with emotional, social, financial, and navigational support (Campos et al., 2014; Crumb et al., 2023, p. 6; McCulloh, 2022).

Rather than using a deficit-based approach to rural place, our combination of these theories reinforces the strength, resiliency, and agency that rural students can develop as a form of resistance to the systemic inequities they face. To capitalize on rural cultural wealth in educational contexts requires recognition of what school–university–community collaborations and interpersonal relationships can provide to students, especially in the college and career planning stages. We acknowledge that students who become *community returners* – people who reject outmigration – can be, and are, significant community and educational assets (McHenry-Sorber et al., 2023).

Methodology

In this study, we used qualitative research methods with three focal participants to capture how these students navigated the GYO program and how rurality, relationships, and diversity played out in their perceptions of the program. To answer the research questions, a variety of data were collected from individual interviews, a focus group, and archival data that included photo elicitation with images provided by the participants. Other material data were obtained from program archives including program

descriptions, websites, and teaching portfolios that the participants created in the program. We used qualitative research analytic techniques, which we describe in detail below.

Researcher Positionalities

We undertook this study as part of a graduate-level seminar on rural education at a public, four-year institution. As a small group of scholars from diverse racial, linguistic, and socioeconomic backgrounds, we had varying experiences of rurality, either growing up in rural communities or living in one at the time of the study (some experienced both). Several of us studied language and multilingualism, and others studied educational policies for leaders and transitions from high school into higher education. Our diverse identities as marginalized women, many from rural backgrounds now rooted within an urban research university, informed how we framed the study in equity and community cultural wealth and further framed our analysis and interpretation of data (Yip, 2024). Although we did not sample for multilingual learners, the linguistic strengths of several team members illuminated the findings on linguistic diversity among the two multilingual GYO participants. Thus, we acknowledge that our diverse backgrounds framed the study and informed the findings.

Study Site

The rural GYO program in which our participants took part was located about an hour drive outside of a metropolitan area in the southeast United States. To drive into the county seat through the downtown area showcased new and old one- and two-story brick buildings: a Chinese restaurant, a plumbing company with a “Thank you Jesus” sign in the window, and a deteriorating movie theater with a marquee and an American flag waving above. Surrounding the downtown were impeccably restored historic homes and a gothic revival Episcopal church, all of which were at least 200 years old, many listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Approximately 50,000 people resided in Leon County at the time of the study. Leon County’s main commodities include agricultural products, poultry, and manufactured goods. According to state level data, across the county, approximately 5,000 K-12 students were served, and about 75% of the schools were considered “low-performing” by state and federal standards.

Like many other counties across the state, Leon County was experiencing a teacher shortage. For the five years prior to this study, the school district had a 20% year-over-year teacher attrition rate, and district officials were desperate to find a solution. In addition to a 7% salary supplement as well as sign-on and retention bonuses to recruit and retain teachers beginning in 2016, to encourage outstanding high school students with an interest in teaching to enter the profession, the county established a GYO teacher program. Funding for the program changed after the 2020 murder of George Floyd. Local businesses approached the community and school district to identify solutions to the racial tensions faced nationally and locally. The district responded that the teacher shortage was taking a toll on school functioning and the

district and local businesses entered into a financial agreement to fund the university costs for students in the GYO program.

Recruited during their sophomore year of high school, students were encouraged to join the GYO program through school-wide announcements and emails from district administrators, personal invitations from high school teachers, and previous participant testimonials. The application process was rigorous, with several rounds of interviews designed to interrogate a student's commitment to succeeding in the GYO environment and later pursue a teaching career.

Once the students completed three high school years, which included a teacher education curriculum and a minimum of 200 hours of local internship experiences in classrooms across all grade levels, they could choose to apply to any in-state university teacher education program. Once accepted into a program, students received a substantial scholarship, which was funded by local Leon County businesses and was renewable annually for three years. The expectation was that for each year that the students utilized the scholarship, they would "repay" Leon County in a year of teaching service in the classroom. The GYO program was heralded across the state in local news outlets as a successful model to build a teacher pipeline for rural school districts.

Participant Sampling

The reputation of Leon County's GYO program, which featured prominently in local educational news sources, led to this study. Following a cold email to inquire about the program, we conducted two initial meetings via Zoom with the director to ensure that potential participants in the program would qualify for our study. We used convenience sampling to recruit students who participated in Leon County's GYO program that were then enrolled in a university undergraduate teacher education program, as we were most interested in gaining understanding about the experiences of students who had left the rural town to attend school in an urban setting. We received Institutional Review Board approval to recruit three to five participants to triangulate interview, observation, and archival data. Three participants who met our criteria elected to participate.

Data Sources

We used multiple sources to obtain detailed data to understand the inner workings of the GYO program, as well as data that captured the participants' experiences and perceptions of it. Primary source data included three in-person data collection sessions. These sessions consisted of two individual, semi-structured interviews with each student and one focus group with all three students. The focus group was conducted between the two individual interviews at a local restaurant of the participants' choice. Students were asked to bring photographs of their rural community to the focus group, and we elicited stories from those.

Secondary source data consisted of two meetings in Leon County at the high school with the director and the lead teacher of the program. These data were used to inform questions for the three focal

participants. In Leon County, we captured images of the rural community, identifying locations and representations of the community and the GYO program itself that were mentioned by the focal participants during interviews. We also gathered archival data about the rural GYO program to learn about the structure, features, and history of the program. To reiterate, our sampling and recruitment were based on Leon County's reputation as a model GYO program and convenience sampling among university students, over 18 years of age, who had participated in the rural GYO program and were completing their university teacher education. As a team of scholars, we kept individual field notes and de-briefed after each interview to share our own emerging ideas. These practices supported as a research team and helped us identify and discuss emerging interpretations grounded in place. We ensured clarity in the data, that is, we ensured that transcriptions were accurate and available for team members, to build trustworthiness across the data sources.

Data Analysis

We used open and axial coding techniques to analyze the corpus of data (Saldaña, 2016). All the data, including images, interviews, focus group, and archival data, were uploaded into ATLAS.ti. We used the collaboration feature to share changes in coding in real time. As a team, we worked collectively through the first participant interviews to ensure that we had a similar understanding of the process of inductive coding and the essence of the data. We took small chunks of data, examined, and interpreted the data with respect to the theoretical framework, namely rural cultural wealth and critical pedagogy of place. Our first round of coding consisted of exactly 100 codes that emerged around place, rural ingenuity, and community return. Some sample open codes included: adaptable, belonging, community care, financial concerns, resilience, and resource scarcity. We collapsed the codes into categories before merging those into themes. Examples of collapsed codes included rural resilience, transitional spaces, relationships and care. For each round of data analysis and coding, we met as a team to ensure we shared similar understandings of the codes.

We then worked in pairs to code each interview, focus group, or material artifact. After the data were coded, we met again and reviewed the codes that were generated from the data, collapsing codes into categories that were semantically similar and removed extraneous codes that were duplicates. We identified areas in the data that needed further clarification and generated a final interview protocol, informing the final individual interview with each participant. We triangulated the data from the various data sources: images we took in the community and those brought by participants to the focus group meeting; interviews; focus group; and archival data regarding the Leon County GYO program. Triangulation aimed to ensure trustworthiness in the study and to ensure that we accurately captured participants' experiences, stories, and realities.

Participants

The three participants in our study included three first-year university students who entered the teacher education program with advanced standing based on college credits earned through the GYO. Even though we met them in their first or second semester at the university, the credits they brought with them placed them academically at the third- or fourth-year level. Below we describe the participants' backgrounds and experiences in the GYO program. All names are pseudonyms.

Domingo

Domingo was the youngest of two boys born to Mexican immigrant parents. He was proud of his heritage and the foundation his parents built that modeled hard work and achieving success in whatever he chose to pursue. Due to his mother's encouragement, Domingo, who attended English only schools, could speak and write in both Spanish and English. A self-proclaimed science enthusiast, Domingo once dreamed of becoming a marine biologist. From an early age, Domingo advocated for his education by seeking out the best possible middle and high schools available in Leon County. Domingo exuded a spirit of fun, perseverance, and resourcefulness. He shared dreams about returning to Mexico, where his family roots were from, and teaching there. His first experience with teaching was in a bilingual (English-Spanish) dual language immersion program where he assisted in a first-grade classroom.

Martina

Martina was the youngest of five siblings in her family. Martina's parents immigrated to Leon County from Mexico more than twenty years ago. She attended Leon County elementary school, and, as she got older, discovered that she could attend a Spanish dual language immersion middle school within the county. As her educational journey flourished with the support of culturally relevant opportunities, which she did. Martina's family encouraged her to focus on her education. She knew she would attend college from a very early age. Martina described Leon County as a "quiet community of fields and close neighbors with a growing Hispanic population." Martina spoke of the people from Leon County with affection, stating that "people from [Leon] County have a lot to offer. There is a lot of potential. We are a part of something to be proud of."

Margaret

Margaret was a witty, 22-year-old white woman from a small, incorporated town in Leon County. As a child, she spent her days working alongside her siblings on the family poultry farm. Margaret's family ties to the land reached back hundreds of years and were a source of palpable pride and deep connection to the community. She spoke of the rural spaces around her as 'home' and maintained a fondness for the people who made the community unique. The history of Leon County was important to Margaret, and she believed that sharing the stories of the people and land were an essential part of rural education, as student and teacher.

Findings

Findings from the study demonstrate students' perceptions of the program, their commitment, challenges they encountered in the GYO program, and how they navigated various geographic (rural and urban) spaces when attending university. The first theme related to the **rural diversity and the sociocultural context** that influenced students' decision to become rural teachers. This both supported and contributed to tensions for the students as they went through the program. The second finding illuminated how **rural community, care and kinship** and perceptions of teaching – their chosen career path – shaped their experiences in the GYO program. The third finding related to **rural resilience and resourcefulness** in relation to the students' rural identity and their ability to navigate physical, social, and emotional spaces. Each is described below.

Rural Diversity and the Sociocultural Context

The first finding related to the social and cultural context of becoming rural teachers and how participants' cultural and linguistic diversity shaped those decisions within the complex context of rurality. We found that the students enacted a *solution lens*, that is, they viewed the GYO program as a way that they could address social and political inequities related to education for themselves and their community. For the two participants who were Latinx and bilingual Spanish-English speakers, this involved a sense of 'representation' as future Latinx teachers for the rapidly growing number of Latinx students in the county. All three participants recognized the sociopolitical context that shaped the GYO program itself, namely the murder of George Floyd in 2020 and the underfunding of rural schools, which was dependent upon legislators who defunded public education in favor of "school choice" vouchers.

Participants identified and prioritized what they saw as their role in the larger organization toward change to support the school district. For example, Martina commented that teacher education programs and the education field in general was primarily composed of White women. When asked why she joined the GYO program and what she thought teachers in the rural county should teach, Martina lamented that she was motivated by hope for change, in the way rural education was societally perceived as non-diverse:

It was easy to feel like I wasn't, I guess, represented in the curriculum. Or you just kind of got used to it without realizing that you got used to it. So, using student backgrounds in the classroom, and acknowledging them [culturally and linguistically diverse students], can be a good experience. I feel like in the teacher education program, it is kind of difficult to teach that, it is hard to talk about it, because as we know, the education class is mostly White females. So, it's kind of hard to like, bring that up. And as much as they [peers] try to empathize with it, it can be difficult. (Martina, Interview 1)

While Martina emphasized the importance of including diverse student backgrounds in the classroom, she simultaneously expressed feeling stifled in a teacher education program where she was one of very few ethnically diverse preservice teachers. Martina was not the only participant who conveyed this view. The tension between the participants' ethnicities and the education field was palpable in the

interviews. The Latino participants' backgrounds significantly shaped how they viewed themselves as future rural teachers. They discussed the lack of diversity within the school district and their sense of personal responsibility to broaden racial and ethnic heterogeneity in schools. However, because of the lack of diversity in their university teacher education program, coupled with their invisibility as diverse students in the rural district, they generally failed to see their language and culture as resources. Martina described her preservice field experience and linguistic diversity as a *threat*:

I wasn't able to [use Spanish] as often as I could, because it [her placement] was like once a week... they [English learners] were kind of grouped together in back of the classroom, and they weren't really engaged because they didn't really understand, like how quickly they [practicing teachers] were speaking science vocabulary in English... so I was able to work with them off in the corner, like off to the side while they were working. I was kind of translating and helping them while they were doing the worksheets. It makes me think about my classroom... if I have an English language learner in my classroom. I could teach them in Spanish, because I feel obligated, like I should provide them resources and all this other stuff in Spanish and essentially teach them, like, two different classes. (Martina, Interview 2)

Rural Community, Care, and Kinship

The second finding underscored participants' interpersonal relationships within their kin networks (that is, immediate family) and school staff, which influenced their college and career choice, and supported mental and emotional health during the high school-to-college transition. Students noted that the encouragement from within these relationships was indispensable, particularly because their parents and peers perceived teaching as a low-income and low-status profession. That conflicted with their self-perception as high-achieving students with STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) interests, which were traditionally associated with high-paying careers. Simultaneously, those same relationships created tensions in their path to becoming a teacher. For example, Margaret discussed the low-status perception her father held about educators:

I have fought tooth and nail the entire way to get where I am. My father hates teachers, principals, board members. He had a very negative experience and that shaped his whole perception. Not one person is at fault. In his mind, teachers aren't shit. And it's always like this double standard, because I was expected to excel in school, but also I was told that education didn't mean anything. (Margaret, Interview 1)

Like Margaret, the other two students described a feeling of tension related to their participation in GYO program. Martina explained that the expectation of returning to the rural county after college added pressure, as she thought about how her relationship with her parents would change and where she might live in order to maintain her independence but still support them. Domingo detailed added stress he felt from within his kin network. As a bilingual student from an immigrant Latino family, he translated for his parents, set up bank accounts, and paid the household bills. Recognizing the responsibility that he had, he

felt compelled as a future teacher to remove that responsibility and pressure from other bilingual children from immigrant households. He shared,

I want people to not feel like they have to grow up a little too soon. I think a kid's purpose is to go to school, have a good education, a quality education, and, um, try to lessen outside factors. I guess that ultimately stresses a child out, because it's a lot, like, if you put that on a kid, that's a lot. (Domingo, Interview 1)

Data from the study revealed that kin networks were complex and nuanced, offering both support *and* stress for students. This was particularly poignant for the Latino students whose families had expectations about their return to the community to help the family. Despite the tensions about education as a career path, all three students expressed some level of responsibility and loyalty to family and their rural community.

Family was not the only strong influence on participants' decision-making. All three participants narrated how teacher-to-student relationships were nurtured within the school environment as they obtained direction for academic work, participating in the GYO program, and applying to universities. The students specifically mentioned the extraordinary personal support from the GYO program lead teacher, Ms. Williams (pseudonym), not only while they were students in the program but as students at the university. Every Sunday, Ms. Williams sent all her past and present GYO students a personal text, praising them for their resilience and reminding them of her support. As Margaret proclaimed, "I would sing the praises of Ms. Williams to the heavens." Martina shared those same sentiments. She noted:

I think Mr. Lucas [the director of the rural high school GYO program] and Ms. Williams definitely spent a lot of time on us and giving us information on us because they do want to see us succeed. It's just like why they make us apply for so many different colleges, because they want us to know that we have, like, options to do something after. (Martina, Focus Group)

Domingo described feeling some pressure from the GYO program administrator to remain enrolled, portraying the communication as a source of deep personal and emotional conflict. He stated, "They're putting you on this pedestal at such an early age...I kind of felt trapped because I had to live up to someone's standard." While he acknowledged the financial and social benefits of the GYO program, and the social change he thought he could make as a teacher, he felt conflicted about his participation:

A lot of people ask me, would you do it again. I would say no. Just because... Yes, I have a [Associate's] degree now. Yes, I have college experience. Yes, I have this teacher field experience, but it wasn't easy getting all that. It was a lot of stress on me. It was a lot of focusing that I had to do, to try and maintain good grades. I like the experiences that I had, but, um, I don't know, I just feel like I missed out on a lot, and I'm still graduating the same year I would have graduated if I didn't take that route. (Domingo, Interview 2)

Ultimately, the participants navigated between these social perceptions and competing tensions – family and educator relationships and their views about becoming rural teachers in a perceived low-status

profession. Parents' doubts were counterbalanced by the relationships the participants had with the GYO educators. This contributed to the participants' sense of resilience, and program retention.

Rural Resilience and Resourcefulness

The final theme involved the resilience and resourcefulness that the participants invoked. The participants felt that their rural community cultivated traits of determination, confidence, and self-reliance within themselves and their peers. Rural resilience was demonstrated in three ways in this study: rural community support as hope, belief in the rural community as having potential to thrive, and the ability to flexibly navigate (code switch) between the rural and urban setting.

Resilience appeared as somewhat of a survival mechanism, as the students navigated the GYO program in an under-resourced rural community, applied to and attended university in an urban area, and learned to 'figure out' how these social systems worked. To demonstrate resilience and community, Margaret shared a photo of her brother standing next to his tractor in a ditch (Figure 1). She described the story of how the tractor broke down in the ditch and "community came together to help us." She continued that the community "didn't go 'haha, you drove your tractor into a ditch,'" but rather came together to find a solution, because getting stuck in a ditch could happen to anyone there. In her words, "it's like the community came together to help rather than to shame."

Figure 1

Margaret's Brother Standing Next to his Tractor in a Ditch (Focus Group)



The stories participants shared about community care came to life in the landscape and small towns. Field notes documented a new local coffee shop that served as a safe haven for students to meet when school projects were due, empty storefronts and businesses that seemed to have been once thriving,

and, overall, a community that was struggling to keep businesses alive and attract newcomers. To the participants, these were markers of rural resilience, rather than struggle. To illustrate, when describing their community, the students highlighted the differences between their rural community and the neighboring affluent town. Domingo stated,

What splits [the county] is actually a railroad track... it felt a little forgotten. People, my friends who I went to church with, who went to school on the other side of the tracks, had better experiences than we did, and it's not even like it's a fifteen-minute difference from one county to another. (Domingo, Interview 1)

Nevertheless, despite the understanding that their community was at an economic disadvantage, participants continued to view the community by its strengths. Their school, rated a "low-performing school" by the state, was an asset to them and their community, and they felt they could be an asset to it in return.

Being from such a close community also affected how participants saw themselves as they navigated between their rural home, urban university, and the constant transition between the two. Participants described feeling included at home but lonely in the city. Martina especially expressed relief in going home every weekend to decompress where she no longer felt the need to "be professional." Domingo echoed this, saying:

If I'm going to be completely honest, the transition to college has been shocking to me... So, I'm not really involved in anything on campus right now. I've been trying to focus on the transition from, like, community college classes to actual, like, university classes, and it's a drastic change. There was this one [undergraduate student organization] group... but I don't know, I just... I guess I felt a little too overwhelmed with what I had on my plate, that I just never went. (Domingo, Interview 1)

As participants expressed what it might feel like to leave their newfound freedom to return to Leon County after three or more years of university study, they also described how they would feel leaving the urban spaces they occupied for multiple years and reacquainting themselves with life in their rural community. Martina commented that low teacher pay was a dilemma. She continued, "I can go somewhere else, get more money, do the same thing and probably be less stressed out because I have everything I need." Margaret also felt conflicted about returning to Leon County after college, noting:

Without this scholarship? I don't know if I would be looking at that county to teach in. And I'm not saying that because I dislike my county. You know, like, it has served me well. It's gotten me to where I am today.

The financial assistance that the students received by participating in the GYO program provided access to higher education and professional career pathways that they might not have had otherwise. At the same time, it also complicated the students' emotional ties to the high school with a sense of obligation and even fear of legal retribution if they did not return to Leon County to teach.

Despite their doubts, ultimately, the participants had positive attitudes toward the future and their work as teachers, which spoke to the rural resilience that shaped their motivations and decisions. They described how obstacles that prevented them from reaching a goal were only temporary, and they felt that

they could always find solutions to problems. Martina summarized how she could achieve what she set out to do stating, “I said, I bet I could do that... and so then I did” (Martina, Interview 2).

Discussion

The data from this study indicate the strengths of rural communities to foster a sense of belonging and care through a rural teacher education GYO program. However, like the literature illuminated by Reagan et al. (2019), some of the more nuanced and detailed areas of teacher education – in this case the linguistic multilingual strengths that two of the three participants held – were not centered in the teacher education program, either at Leon County or the university. Thus, rural, cultural, and linguistic strengths were left unacknowledged and remained invisible in these teacher education programs.

At the intersection of community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) and rural cultural wealth (Crumb et al., 2023), this study found that three adult participants in a rural GYO teacher education program demonstrated ingenuity and resourcefulness, leading to rural resilience. Their rural resilience consisted of strategies that they invoked to respond to limited resources and tensions that arose in their lives, and forward-thinking attitudes of hope for their rural community. In the context of rural resourcefulness, the three participants described how the GYO program itself was a resource for them to access higher education. Despite not having had experience in urban or university settings, their personal resourcefulness and relationships with community members were used to confront sociocultural adversities that they faced. They committed to becoming *trailblazers for change* in the community.

The participants in this study recognized that as rural teachers, they would work in under-resourced schools, earn low wages, and run the risk of being socially siloed, such as being the sole voice of representation for other Latino students. Language diversity in their community was not a resource for student learning (Ruiz, 1984). However, they were committed to disrupting that deficit ideology for their future linguistically-diverse students. Thus, linguistic capital (Yosso, 2005) manifested in different ways for these rural students. Martina and Domingo used their cultural and linguistic knowledge to assist their families in the rural community where few or no bilingual resources were available. What emerged from the data was the responsibility that the two bilingual participants felt toward their rural community and their commitment to build representation of Latinos as teachers and in professional careers.

The three participants spoke passionately about their relationships with their family members, who resided in the rural community, and, despite differences in perceptions on teaching, were a source of stability for the students. Knowing that they would return to their home county provided a sense of grounding and an image for the future. Yet as noted above, rural relationships and kin networks for these three went beyond the family; they maintained strong relationships with the director of the GYO program and the lead teacher, who provided emotional support while in university. This was a source *collective care*. As an extension of Yosso (2005) and Crumb et al.’s (2023) work on kin relationships, the GYO program administrator and the lead teacher provided social and emotional support to the students as preservice

teachers, so much so that these relationships became “like family,” or *fictive kin* (Nelson, 2020, p. 47). This significant finding is important for future research on GYO programs in rural spaces. The fictive kinship uncovered in this study appeared to buffer tensions around student choices when pressure from familial kin ran high, and as such, the students made choices based on advice from the GYO program staff, trusting that the staff were acting in their best interest regarding their college and career choices. Future research should explore potential interest convergence within programs that require (emotionally, financially, or legally intimidate) diverse students to return to an area with limited career and financial opportunity. Even as these relationships became influential to students, they also created emotional spaces where students felt guilt and shame at the potential of not following through on their long-term commitment to the GYO program and rural community that invested in their success.

Conclusion

This study examined the perceptions of rural students participating in a high school GYO teacher education program. The program was designed as a response to persistent teacher turnover and limited resources in a rural agricultural community in the southeast U.S. Using qualitative research methods, the study found that the three focal participants’ commitment to the program and return to their rural community was centered on their relationships with family and kin-like relationships with rural educators. The participants noted their desire to challenge educational practices that were structurally unequal, especially for rural schools and students, while striving to uplift the rural community, its strengths, and the under-represented people in it.

How these students enact a critical pedagogy of place that identifies and dismantles inequitable power structures within their specific community and re-constructs those in more humanizing and equitable ways is yet to be seen. Until then, these future teachers represent a pedagogy of hope, where culturally and linguistically sustaining practices could be practiced and normalized in rural schools (Paris & Alim, 2017). The students’ rural upbringing and community made a difference in the lives and experiences of these future educators – it shaped their identities, interpersonal relationships, goals and choices, motivation, and the development of the resilience they needed to navigate across rural and urban settings and imagine their communities and future rural schools as opportunities for social change. As one former GYO participant noted: “We are just the beginning of what is possible.”

This study holds implications for PK-12 education and GYO teacher education programs. First, the linguistic, racial, and cultural diversity of the participants were not centered in the participants’ K12 education nor their university experiences. Diverse rural students bring strengths, resilience, and resources that, when left unacknowledged, undermine students’ sense of belonging and the unique contributions that they can make to education as teachers. This is the case even though the community held asset-based perspectives of rurality and their community. In other words, an asset-based perspective of rurality can continue to overlook other assets inherent in the community.

Secondly, research on rural teacher education with diverse students remains seriously understudied (Azano et al., 2025; Thier et al., 2021). Given ongoing calls to reduce federal funding for social programs and educational research, the need to remain connected to rural communities through personal and professional relationships is more urgent (Knott, 2025). Otherwise, rural communities may become more isolated and less understood.

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About the Authors

Micaha Dean Hughes, is a Ph.D. candidate in Educational Psychology at North Carolina State University. Her research examines how educational ecosystems shape adolescents' postsecondary future orientation and educational opportunity. She is particularly interested in the mechanisms through which family engagement and school-university-community partnerships influence educational aspirations and identity development for youth.

Maria Coady, Ph.D., is the Goodnight Distinguished Professor in Education and Professor of Multilingual Education at North Carolina State University. Her scholarship focuses on multilingual learners and the educators, families, and communities that support them, particularly in rural schools and communities. For more than 25 years, her work has examined how language, place, policy, and educational opportunity intersect in the lives of multilingual learners and their families.

Mary Michaels Estrada, Ph.D., is an Assistant Teaching Professor in TESOL at North Carolina State University. Her research focuses on language teacher education, multilingual learning, and global professional development.

Jodie Roberson, Ph.D., is Program Head of Early Childhood Education at Vance-Granville Community College. She holds a Ph.D. in Educational Leadership, Policy, and Human Development from North Carolina State University. Her research focuses on rural education policy, teacher recruitment and retention, multilingual learners, and educator mobility. With more than 25 years of experience across K–12, higher education, and international educational settings, she is committed to advancing equitable and sustainable educational opportunities through research, policy, and practice.

Rachel Montesinos Jorro, M.S., is a bilingual public relations strategist working in higher education in North Carolina. In her current role, she leads the institution's communications response to issues, crises and emergencies, in addition to a variety of proactive efforts. She has taught at the college level and worked in K-12 schools, as well as with nonprofits in Eastern N.C. Being a native Spanish speaker from Cuba allows her to leverage her background to better support the diverse communities she serves.

Rachel received her master's degree from NC State University and her bachelor's degree from the University of North Carolina Wilmington; both degrees are in communication.

Mathematics Identity Among Rural African American Students: A Narrative Study

Austin Ferrell, *University of Tennessee at Martin*

This study explored the mathematics experiences and identities of five African American college students who attended rural K–12 schools in the southern United States. Using narrative inquiry and thematic analysis, the research examined how rurality shaped students' perceptions of mathematics learning and their sense of themselves as mathematics learners. Findings revealed three central themes: (a) K–12 mathematics experiences were variable and context-dependent, with advanced coursework fostering confidence while specific content areas posed persistent struggles; (b) teacher relationships strongly influenced mathematics identity, with long-term and race-conscious connections proving especially meaningful; and (c) supportive peer networks enhanced persistence and engagement in mathematics. These findings highlight the complexity of mathematics identity development in rural contexts and underscore the importance of culturally responsive teaching, relationship-building, and equitable access to advanced coursework in rural schools. Implications for practice and future research in rural mathematics education are discussed.

Keywords: rural education, African American students, mathematics identity, narrative inquiry, teacher-student relationships

Rural education represents a significant portion of the U.S. schooling landscape, serving nearly half of the nation's districts and over one third of all schools. Yet, despite this prevalence, rural education remains consistently underrepresented in educational research (Thier et al., 2021). The limited attention given to rural schooling obscures the unique challenges and assets that shape the experiences of students growing up in these communities. Within this broad neglect, even less attention has been paid to mathematics education in rural contexts. Mathematics is often described as a gatekeeper subject, influencing whether students can access advanced academic pathways, enroll in higher education, and pursue careers in STEM fields (Cribbs et al., 2015). For African American students, mathematics learning is often further complicated by racialized experiences that shape how they are perceived and how they come to view themselves as mathematics learners (Martin, 2007; McGee, 2015).

Urban contexts, while important, cannot fully represent the educational realities of African American students in rural communities. Rural schools often face distinctive challenges such as chronic underfunding, difficulty attracting and retaining highly qualified teachers, and limited access to advanced coursework (Tieken & Montgomery, 2021). At the same time, rural communities are often characterized by long-standing social ties, stability, and multigenerational connections between families and schools. For African American students, navigating mathematics in these contexts can mean simultaneously benefiting from

close-knit relationships and facing structural inequities linked to both race and geography. These layered experiences have received limited scholarly attention, leaving important questions unanswered about how mathematics identity develops in rural contexts.

Mathematics Identity and Race

The construct of mathematics identity has become a central framework for understanding how students engage with mathematics and persist in mathematical learning (Darragh, 2016). Identity, in this sense, refers to how students see themselves and are seen by others as “doers of mathematics” (Aguirre et al., 2013, p. 5). Mathematics identity encompasses perceptions of ability, belonging, confidence, and the value placed on mathematics. Importantly, research has shown that mathematics identity is not formed in isolation but is shaped by social interactions with teachers, peers, and family members, as well as by broader cultural narratives about who is and is not good at math (Boaler et al., 2000; Solomon et al., 2011).

For African American students, race is inseparable from mathematics identity. Martin (2007, 2019) and others have shown that mathematics classrooms are not race-neutral spaces; rather, they can reproduce inequities, stereotypes, and deficit-based assumptions that undermine African American students’ sense of belonging in mathematics. McGee (2015) described African American students’ identities as fragile or robust depending on how they navigated racialized experiences in mathematics. Some students developed resilience and persistence despite marginalization, while others internalized deficit narratives that hindered their mathematical engagement. While this growing body of literature has deepened understanding of race and mathematics identity, its urban emphasis overlooks how these dynamics may play out differently in rural settings (Azano et al., 2023; Biddle & Azano, 2016).

The Rural Context

Rural schools often have smaller student populations, higher rates of poverty, and fewer financial resources compared to suburban and urban counterparts (Mathis, 2003). Students in rural schools are less likely to have access to Advanced Placement courses, dual-credit options, or specialized mathematics instruction (Tieken & Montgomery, 2021). Teacher shortages can lead to instructors teaching outside their areas of expertise, which may further impact students’ mathematics opportunities. At the same time, rural schools are embedded within communities where teachers, parents, and students often know one another personally across generations. Teachers who remain in the same district for decades may develop deep, sustained relationships with families, which can be both supportive and constraining (Fregoso, 2024; Howley & Howley, 2014).

For African American students in rural schools, the rural context intersects with racial identity in complex ways. Some students may feel heightened visibility as one of only a few African Americans in advanced mathematics courses, while others may experience stronger affirmation from teachers who share

long-term relational histories with their families. Peer networks may provide essential encouragement and accountability for students navigating advanced coursework with limited institutional supports. Yet, despite these dynamics, the research literature has not fully explored how African American students describe their mathematics learning in rural settings or how rurality shapes their mathematics identities.

Purpose of the Study

This study sought to address this gap by exploring how African American students from rural backgrounds narrate their mathematics experiences and identities. Using narrative inquiry, the research centered the voices of five African American college students who reflected on their K–12 mathematics trajectories. Their stories illuminate how rural schooling contexts, teacher relationships, and peer networks shaped both their academic performance and their sense of self in mathematics. By examining these narratives, this study contributes to a fuller understanding of mathematics identity formation in rural schools.

Significance

This study makes several contributions to the literature on both mathematics identity and rural education. First, it situates mathematics identity research within the rural context, expanding a field that has largely concentrated on urban education. Second, it amplifies the voices of African American students in rural schools, who are often marginalized in both research and practice. Third, the findings provide practical insights for teachers, administrators, and policymakers working to improve equity in rural mathematics education. By highlighting the central role of teacher relationships and peer support, the study underscores the importance of culturally responsive pedagogy, mentoring, and intentional structures that foster belonging.

Beyond its scholarly contributions, this research has direct implications for practice. Teachers in rural schools may be uniquely positioned to influence mathematics identity due to the long-term nature of their relationships with students. Culturally responsive practices and affirming teacher-student relationships can counteract negative stereotypes and foster persistence in mathematics. Similarly, creating opportunities for positive peer collaboration can help sustain students' confidence and motivation. At the policy level, addressing disparities in access to advanced coursework is critical to ensuring that African American students in rural schools are not systematically denied opportunities to develop strong mathematics identities.

Research Questions

This study was guided by the following research questions:

1. How do African American college students from rural backgrounds describe their mathematics experiences in K–12 settings?
2. How does the rural context influence the mathematics identities of African American students?

Literature Review

Rural Education

Rural education has long been a neglected area of scholarly inquiry, despite the fact that nearly half of U.S. school districts and over one third of schools are located in rural areas (Thier et al., 2021). Rurality is more than a geographic label; it encompasses cultural, social, and economic dimensions that shape students' opportunities and constraints (Howley & Howley, 2014). The diversity of rural communities complicates efforts to define "rural," with federal and state agencies employing varied classifications based on population, proximity to urban centers, and economic activity (Coladarci, 2007). This variability highlights the importance of situating research in context, as rurality can mean different things in different regions of the country.

Defining Rurality

Researchers have wrestled with how best to define rurality, and these definitional debates have important consequences for policy and practice. For example, a school deemed rural under one classification system may not be considered rural under another. These inconsistencies can obscure the realities faced by schools that contend with limited funding, high poverty, and geographic isolation. At the same time, rural schools often occupy central roles within their communities, serving not only as educational institutions but also as social and cultural hubs (Biddle & Azano, 2016).

Challenges Facing Rural Schools

Although rural schools are often celebrated for their close-knit communities, they also face persistent challenges that affect both teaching and learning. Chronic underfunding, difficulties in recruiting and retaining highly qualified teachers, and limited access to advanced coursework are among the most pressing issues (Tieken & Montgomery, 2021). Smaller student populations make it difficult to justify the expense of specialized mathematics courses such as calculus or statistics, thereby restricting students' academic opportunities. Limited professional development and reduced access to technology further constrain instructional quality and innovation. These challenges collectively shape the academic trajectories of rural students and restrict their postsecondary opportunities.

The COVID-19 pandemic further illuminated the inequities that have long characterized rural education. Rural schools faced amplified challenges related to broadband access, technology integration, and teacher retention, all of which directly affected students' academic engagement. A study by Graves et al. (2021) found that 1 in 6 rural students came from areas with poor broadband coverage, leading to significant disparities in access to remote learning opportunities. Similarly, Kormos and Wisdom (2021) highlighted that rural educators often rely on personal trial and error to integrate technology, due to budgetary constraints and limited student internet access at home. These challenges are compounded by teacher shortages, with rural districts facing unique difficulties in attracting and retaining qualified educators, which further impacts student learning outcomes (Fregoso, 2024). Incorporating these perspectives strengthens the call for research that considers how place-based inequities interact with racialized experiences in shaping mathematics learning.

African American Students in Rural Schools

The experiences of African American students in rural schools remain particularly underexplored. Rural communities are often imagined as predominantly White, yet they are increasingly diverse, with African American, Latinx, and immigrant populations contributing to growing demographic complexity (Tieken & Montgomery, 2021). For African American students, rural schooling presents both opportunities and inequities. On one hand, the small size of rural schools can create strong, long-lasting relationships between teachers and students. On the other, structural inequities—such as underrepresentation in advanced mathematics courses and exposure to novice teachers—limit access to rigorous learning opportunities (Logan & Burdick-Will, 2017). The dual realities of support and inequity highlight the need to study African American students' experiences in rural mathematics classrooms.

Within rural mathematics education, access to rigorous coursework remains one of the most persistent equity challenges (Biddle & Azano, 2016; Showalter et al., 2019). Limited funding and teacher shortages often restrict course offerings, leaving African American students with fewer opportunities to pursue advanced mathematics. These inequities not only affect academic preparation but also influence how students perceive themselves as mathematics learners. When advanced coursework is unavailable, students may internalize structural barriers as personal limitations, reinforcing deficit-based narratives about ability. Addressing these disparities requires not only structural reform but also intentional relational and pedagogical practices that affirm students' mathematical potential within constrained contexts.

Mathematics Identity

In addition to understanding rural schooling, it is important to consider the role of mathematics identity in shaping students' academic pathways. Mathematics identity has become a central construct in educational research because it captures not only what students know but also how they see themselves in relation to mathematics (Aguirre et al., 2013; Darragh, 2016). Identity provides a lens for examining why some students persist in mathematics while others disengage, regardless of their demonstrated ability.

Defining Mathematics Identity

Mathematics identity refers to how students perceive themselves and how they are recognized by others as mathematics learners. It involves perceptions of ability, feelings of belonging, motivation to persist, and recognition from teachers and peers (Solomon et al., 2011). Unlike test scores or grades, identity is not a static measure but rather a dynamic story that evolves over time (Sfard & Prusak, 2005). Students' identities can be strengthened by experiences of success and affirmation or undermined by exclusion and failure.

Components of Mathematics Identity

Research has identified several key dimensions of mathematics identity that influence persistence. These include students' self-perceptions of competence, their sense of belonging in mathematics spaces, and the degree to which they feel recognized by others as capable (Aguirre et al., 2013; Latterell & Wilson, 2017). Students who view themselves positively in these domains are more likely to pursue advanced coursework and STEM careers, whereas students with fragile or negative identities often avoid mathematics whenever possible (Latterell & Wilson, 2017). Identity therefore operates both as an outcome of prior experiences and as a predictor of future engagement.

Narrative Approaches

One powerful way to understand mathematics identity is through narrative approaches. Narrative theory views identity as the stories that students tell about themselves, shaped by both internal reflections and external interactions (Langer-Osuna & Esmonde, 2017; Sfard & Prusak, 2005). These narratives are constructed over time and reflect experiences of success, belonging, marginalization, or exclusion. Teachers and peers play central roles in these narratives, as recognition and affirmation can strengthen mathematics identity, while stereotypes or neglect can erode it (Cribbs et al., 2015). Because mathematics is often framed as objective and meritocratic, students may internalize struggles as reflections of personal inadequacy rather than responses to inequitable systems.

Rural Considerations in Mathematics Identity

Despite the importance of mathematics identity, little research has considered how geography shapes its development. Rural students' mathematics identities may be influenced by the structural limitations of small schools, including fewer advanced courses, reduced access to enrichment, and long-term relationships with the same teachers. These dynamics can either support or constrain identity formation. For African American students in rural schools, identity development is further complicated by racialized experiences, making it essential to examine how rurality and race intersect to shape mathematics identity (Aguirre et al., 2013; Biddle & Azano, 2016).

Race in Mathematics Education

While rurality and identity are both critical factors, race adds another layer of complexity to mathematics education. For African American students, mathematics identity cannot be separated from racial identity. Classrooms are not neutral spaces; they are shaped by racialized interactions, expectations, and power dynamics (Martin, 2007, 2019). Understanding the role of race in mathematics education is therefore essential for examining African American students' experiences in rural schools.

Race and Identity in Mathematics

Research has consistently shown that African American students experience mathematics through a racialized lens. Martin (2007) documented how students often framed their experiences explicitly as Black learners in mathematics, highlighting the inseparability of race and mathematics identity. These dynamics contribute to fragile identities, in which students may persist in mathematics but remain vulnerable to racial stereotypes and deficit-based assumptions (McGee, 2015).

Experiences of Marginalization

African American students frequently encounter stereotype threat, lowered expectations, and deficit-based perspectives in mathematics classrooms (Gholson & Robinson, 2019). These experiences can undermine confidence, erode persistence, and lead students to internalize negative narratives about themselves as mathematics learners. For some, mathematics becomes a site of struggle and alienation rather than empowerment. At the same time, students also develop strategies of resistance, demonstrating resilience and persistence despite systemic inequities (McGee & Pearman, 2014). The tension between fragility and resilience underscores the complexity of mathematics identity for African American students.

Protective Factors and Teacher Relationships

Despite challenges, research also identifies protective factors that support robust mathematics identities. Berry et al. (2011) found that relational support, recognition of ability, and affirmation of racial identity were particularly influential for African American boys. Teachers who engage in culturally responsive pedagogy and maintain long-term, supportive relationships can counteract negative stereotypes and affirm students' identities (Fregoso, 2024; Gay, 2018). Similarly, peer networks provide encouragement and accountability, reinforcing persistence in mathematics. These protective factors underscore the relational nature of mathematics identity and point to potential strategies for supporting African American students in rural schools.

Additionally, culturally responsive teaching provides a promising approach for strengthening mathematics identity among African American students, particularly in rural settings where racial diversity among teachers is limited. Rooted in the work of Ladson-Billings (1995), Gay (2018), and Gholson and Robinson (2019), culturally responsive pedagogy emphasizes the integration of students' lived experiences, cultural knowledge, and community contexts into instruction. When teachers use culturally

affirming examples, communicate high expectations, and demonstrate care, they validate students' intellectual capacity and counter deficit-oriented assumptions. In rural mathematics classrooms, such practices can be transformative, helping students see themselves not as outsiders to mathematics but as capable participants whose experiences and perspectives matter.

Rural Contexts and Race

While race and mathematics identity have been studied extensively in urban settings, far less is known about how these dynamics unfold in rural schools. Rural African American students may face unique challenges, such as being one of few students of color in advanced classes, which heightens visibility and social pressures. At the same time, the smaller size of rural schools often leads to more sustained relationships with teachers, which can either support or constrain identity development. Limited resources and fewer advanced opportunities compound these challenges, creating a distinct rural-racial context that warrants focused investigation (Azano et al., 2023; Fregoso, 2024).

Intersectionality and Mathematics Identity

Understanding mathematics identity among African American students in rural contexts requires attention to the ways race, geography, and opportunity intersect. Drawing from intersectionality theory (Collins, 2019; Crenshaw, 1991), this study recognizes that students' experiences are shaped by overlapping systems of power that influence access, belonging, and recognition. Intersectionality provides a lens for examining how African American students navigate mathematics spaces that are simultaneously racialized and geographically marginalized. Rather than viewing race and rurality as separate or additive factors, this framework emphasizes their interaction—how being both African American and rural uniquely shapes students' mathematics trajectories. Through this perspective, mathematics identity is understood not only as a reflection of individual experience but also as a product of broader structural and cultural forces that define who is seen as capable, who is supported, and who is excluded within mathematics learning spaces.

Summary

This literature review underscores the importance of examining mathematics identity at the intersection of rural education and race. Rural schools face structural challenges that restrict access to rigorous mathematics coursework, yet they also provide opportunities for strong relational ties. Mathematics identity research highlights the importance of belonging, recognizing, and persisting, but has rarely considered rural contexts. Race shapes African American students' experiences in mathematics in rural settings too, yet most research has focused on urban schools.

The current study addresses these gaps by centering the narratives of African American students who attended rural schools. By examining their stories, this research illuminates how rurality and race

intersect to influence mathematics identity and provides insights into how educators and policymakers can better support equity in rural mathematics education.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative narrative inquiry design to explore how African American students from rural schools described their mathematics learning and identities. Narrative inquiry was chosen because it provides a lens for understanding how people construct meaning through stories (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Identities are not static traits but evolving narratives that individuals tell about themselves in relation to others and to broader contexts (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Sfard & Prusak, 2005). By eliciting and analyzing participants' stories, the study sought to illuminate how mathematics learning experiences, teacher and peer relationships, and the rural context shaped students' identities as mathematics learners.

The emphasis in narrative inquiry is not on generalization but on the richness of lived experience. This approach acknowledges that individual stories are situated within broader social, cultural, and institutional contexts. For African American students from rural schools, mathematics identity cannot be disentangled from the racialized and resource-constrained settings in which their schooling occurred. Narrative inquiry provided an avenue to capture the complexity of these intersections and to highlight participants' voices in their own terms.

Participants

Five African American college students (undergraduate and graduate) at a public university in the southern United States participated in this study. All had attended and completed their K–12 education in rural school districts as defined by state and federal criteria, in the southwestern part of the United States. Purposive sampling guided participant selection to ensure relevance to the research questions. Criteria for inclusion were that participants identified as African American, completed their K–12 schooling in a rural context, and were willing to participate in multiple interviews that explored mathematics experiences.

The group consisted of both men and women and represented a variety of majors in the social sciences, education, and health professions. None were mathematics majors, but all had successfully completed required college-level mathematics coursework. Their retrospective accounts allowed for a holistic look at how mathematics identity was formed and reshaped over time, from early schooling through college entry. Each participant brought unique perspectives. Some described strong affinity with mathematics at particular points, while others narrated persistent struggles. Collectively, their voices illustrated both the diversity and commonality of African American students' experiences in rural mathematics education. Table 1 includes information about the participants, including their selected pseudonym, age, gender, classification, and general location of hometown.

Table 1*Participants' Demographics*

Participant's name	Age	Location/Area where participant grew up	Gender	College classification [credits wise]
Apollo	21	Northwestern part of State A	M	Senior
Darius	19	Northwestern part of State A	M	Sophomore
Frank	20	Northwestern part of State A	M	Junior
Nevaeh	23	Southwestern part of State B	F	First semester graduate student
Rosa	22	Northwestern part of State C	F	Senior

Data Collection

Data collection occurred over the course of a semester and consisted of semi-structured interviews conducted in two to three sessions with each participant. Each interview lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes. The semi-structured protocol allowed consistency across participants while leaving room for individual storytelling and follow-up. Guiding questions focused on key areas, including memorable classroom experiences, encounters with specific mathematics content, relationships with teachers and peers, and reflections on how participants came to see themselves in relation to mathematics.

The first interview typically invited participants to recount their earliest memories of mathematics learning in elementary school and to trace their experiences through middle and high school. The second interview explored relationships and identity more explicitly, including moments of affirmation or discouragement, access to advanced coursework, and the role of race in shaping experiences.

All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and transcribed verbatim. Field notes captured contextual details and the researcher's observations. This iterative process of multiple interviews was consistent with narrative inquiry's emphasis on building trust and co-constructing meaning between researcher and participant.

Data Analysis

Analysis proceeded through several iterative stages, drawing on narrative and thematic approaches (Riessman, 2007). Each transcript was read multiple times to identify significant moments, storylines, and turning points that revealed how participants made sense of their mathematics experiences. Following Riessman's (2007) framework, the researcher attended to both the what and the how of each story—the content of participants' experiences and the narrative forms through which they expressed identity. Each participant's account was then crafted into a narrative portrait, organized chronologically to highlight key shifts in confidence, belonging, and recognition. These portraits served as analytic cases that

preserved the integrity of each story before engaging in cross-case thematic analysis. The cross-case synthesis identified recurring themes while also capturing tensions and contradictions that reflected the complexity of mathematics identity formation. This process ensured that the analysis honored participants' voices while revealing the broader social and cultural patterns shaping their experiences.

Trustworthiness

Establishing trustworthiness was an important component of the study. Several strategies were used to enhance credibility, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Multiple interviews with each participant allowed for prolonged engagement, providing depth and the opportunity to confirm or clarify interpretations. Member checking was conducted by sharing narrative summaries with participants and inviting feedback on accuracy and resonance. This step ensured that interpretations remained grounded in participants' perspectives.

An audit trail was maintained throughout the study, documenting analytic decisions, coding processes, and evolving themes. This transparency provided a record of how findings emerged from the data. Peer debriefing with colleagues familiar with narrative inquiry offered additional perspectives, challenging assumptions and strengthening the robustness of interpretations. Finally, reflexive journaling was used to record the researcher's insights, questions, and positional reflections across the data collection and analysis process. Collectively, these strategies enhanced the study's rigor and trustworthiness.

Researcher Positionality

As the researcher, I acknowledge that my positionality influenced both the conduct of the study and its interpretations. I am an African American educator who grew up in a rural community and pursued advanced study in mathematics education. This background created points of connection that facilitated rapport and trust with participants, who often expressed appreciation for being understood by someone with similar experiences. At the same time, my proximity to the topic required deliberate reflexivity to avoid conflating my story with those of participants.

To address this, I engaged in ongoing reflection through journaling and peer dialogue, critically examining how my assumptions and experiences shaped the questions I asked and the interpretations I made. Narrative inquiry emphasizes relational engagement, and I sought to balance that relational stance with a commitment to honoring participants' unique voices. Recognizing that all narratives are co-constructed between researcher and participant, I worked to make visible the interpretive nature of this inquiry while foregrounding participants' perspectives.

Summary

This study's methodology reflects its central aim: to understand how African American students from rural schools make sense of their mathematics learning and identities. Narrative inquiry provided a framework for eliciting and analyzing participants' stories in ways that highlight both individual experiences

and broader structural contexts. The combination of purposive sampling, iterative interviews, narrative analysis, and reflexive practices supported a rigorous and trustworthy account. By foregrounding participants' voices, the methodology created space to examine how rurality and race intersect to shape mathematics identity, an area rarely addressed in the literature on either mathematics education or rural schooling.

Findings

Analysis of the five participants' stories revealed three overarching themes that illuminate how rural African American students experienced mathematics and constructed their mathematics identities. These themes were: (a) variability in mathematics experiences across K–12 schooling, (b) the central role of teacher relationships, and (c) the importance of peer support for persistence. Within each theme, participants' narratives illustrate how rurality and race shaped both opportunities and constraints.

Variability in Mathematics Experiences

Participants described mathematics experiences that varied widely across grade levels, teachers, and content areas. Some spoke of early confidence and success, while others recounted repeated struggles that undermined their sense of belonging in mathematics. This variability often hinged on the type of instruction they received and the opportunities available within their rural schools.

Apollo recalled his early schooling with enthusiasm:

In elementary school I was always the first one to finish the math problems. Teachers would call me up to show the class how I did it, and that made me feel like I was good at math. But by middle school, it started to change. We didn't have as many resources, and sometimes the teacher just read straight from the book. That's when I started to lose confidence.

Apollo's story illustrates how early experiences of recognition can foster strong mathematics identities, but also how limited instructional practices in later grades can weaken that confidence. His narrative highlights the fragility of mathematics identity when instructional quality is inconsistent.

Other participants described variability tied to specific mathematical content. Frank explained: "I loved algebra. It made sense to me, like a puzzle. But geometry was something else. The teacher was good, but the subject just didn't click. After that, I started telling myself, maybe I'm not really a math person." Frank's reflection underscores how subject matter differences can influence identity development. His narrative also shows how students internalize struggles with particular content areas as reflections of their overall ability, a common dynamic in mathematics education.

The variability of participants' experiences was compounded by structural limitations in rural schools. Several noted the lack of advanced coursework, which curtailed opportunities to challenge themselves. Nevaeh explained:

We didn't have calculus at my school. If you wanted to take it, you had to do it online, and hardly anyone did because it was too hard without a teacher. So even though I liked math, I never got to push myself the way students in bigger schools probably did.

Nevaeh's account reflects the structural inequities of rural schooling, where advanced opportunities are often unavailable or accessible only through less supportive formats. Her story highlights how rurality shapes mathematics identity by limiting the extent to which students can explore and strengthen their abilities.

Rosa offered yet another dimension of variability. She recalled the difficulty of maintaining confidence in the face of discouraging experiences:

There were times I felt like math just wasn't for me. I'd try my best, but teachers didn't always see that. I remember one year I stayed after class almost every day to get help, but it felt like no matter what I did, I couldn't change how they saw me—as the one who struggled.

Rosa's narrative stands out for her persistence. Despite feeling unseen and sometimes underestimated, she continued to seek help and practice independently. Her experience underscores the resilience that many African American students must develop to persist in mathematics when recognition and support are inconsistent.

Together, these narratives demonstrate that mathematics experiences for rural African American students are neither uniformly positive nor uniformly negative. Instead, they are highly variable, shaped by instructional quality, subject matter, and the structural limitations of rural schools.

The Central Role of Teacher Relationships

Across all participants, teacher relationships emerged as a defining influence on mathematics identity. Teachers were remembered not only for the content they taught but also for the ways they affirmed or discouraged students. Long-term relationships, which were common in small rural schools, amplified the influence of teachers on students' mathematics trajectories.

For some participants, teachers served as powerful sources of encouragement. Darius spoke about his high school mathematics teacher:

She was the only Black teacher I ever had, and she taught me for three years straight. She would tell me, "You can do this. Don't let anyone tell you different." She knew me, not just as a student, but as a person. That made me believe I belonged in math spaces, even when the work was hard.

Darius's narrative illustrates how representation and sustained support can strengthen mathematics identity. His teacher's recognition of both his academic and personal identity provided affirmation that counteracted stereotypes and self-doubt.

Other participants, however, described teacher relationships that undermined their confidence. Apollo reflected on one such experience in high school: "I had a teacher who never really called on me, even when I knew the answer. It was like she didn't see me. After a while, I stopped raising my hand. I figured, what's the point?" This account demonstrates how lack of recognition can erode students' sense

of competence and belonging. For Apollo, the absence of affirmation became internalized as invisibility, shaping his identity as someone excluded from mathematics participation.

Rosa also recalled how teacher interactions influenced her persistence. Although some teachers offered encouragement, others failed to recognize her efforts: “One teacher told me maybe math just wasn’t my subject. That hurt because I worked so hard. But I didn’t stop. I just stopped asking for help and tried to figure things out on my own.” Rosa’s story highlights how discouraging teacher feedback can have long-term effects, but also how resilience can emerge from those same moments of marginalization.

Long-term relationships with teachers, a hallmark of rural schooling, could therefore be either beneficial or detrimental. When positive, they provided stability, affirmation, and a sense of belonging. When negative, they reinforced feelings of inadequacy and exclusion over multiple years. The rural context thus magnified the influence of teachers on mathematics identity.

The Importance of Peer Support

In addition to teachers, peers played a critical role in shaping participants’ mathematics identities. Supportive peer networks offered encouragement, accountability, and a sense of solidarity, particularly in contexts where students faced challenges.

Nevaeh described how working with peers helped her persist:

In high school I had a group of friends who were all in the same math class. We would study together, help each other out, and laugh when we got it wrong. It made math feel less scary. Even if I didn’t always get it, I knew I wasn’t alone.

Her story highlights the protective role of peer support in mitigating anxiety and promoting persistence. Mathematics became less isolating when shared within a supportive community.

Frank also emphasized the role of peers but noted how peer networks could be complicated by issues of race and representation: “In my advanced classes, I was usually the only Black student. My friends weren’t in those classes, so I didn’t have that same support system. It felt lonely, like I had to prove myself all the time.” Frank’s narrative points to the intersection of rurality and race in shaping peer dynamics. In small, predominantly White schools, African American students in advanced classes often found themselves isolated, without peers who shared their racial identity. This isolation heightened the pressure of representation and reduced the buffering effect of peer support.

Peer networks thus functioned as both sources of resilience and sites of vulnerability. When present, they provided encouragement and collective persistence. When absent, particularly in advanced mathematics contexts, their absence amplified feelings of isolation and fragility.

Summary of Findings

The findings reveal that mathematics identity for African American students from rural schools was shaped by a combination of variability in instructional experiences, the influence of teacher relationships, and the role of peer support networks. Participants’ stories show how rural schooling provided both

opportunities and constraints. While small schools fostered long-term relationships, these relationships could either affirm or erode mathematics identity. Peer support provided resilience, but racial isolation in advanced classes left some students vulnerable. Structural inequities, such as limited access to advanced coursework, further constrained opportunities to strengthen mathematics identity.

These narratives underscore the complexity of mathematics identity development in rural contexts. Rather than presenting a single, uniform experience, they highlight the ways that race, rurality, and relationships intersect to shape the mathematics trajectories of African American students.

Discussion

The narratives of Apollo, Darius, Frank, Naveah, and Rosa provide an important window into how African American students from rural communities construct mathematics identities in the context of both opportunity and constraint. Their stories complicate simplistic portrayals of rural education by revealing variability in experiences, the weight of teacher-student relationships, and the role of peer support networks. The discussion that follows situates these findings within the literature on rural schooling, mathematics identity, and race in mathematics education, before turning to implications for practice, policy, and future research. Collectively, these narratives reveal how race, rurality, and identity operate not as separate forces but as intersecting systems that shape students' mathematics experiences and opportunities to belong.

Variability in Rural Mathematics Experiences

One of the clearest findings from this study is the unevenness of participants' mathematics experiences across grade levels, content areas, and classroom contexts. For Apollo, early confidence gave way to discouragement as instruction shifted toward rote textbook use and disengagement. For Rosa, persistent effort in the face of discouragement exemplified resilience, which is a form of agency that allowed her to persist despite inequitable treatment. Her story parallels research that shows how African American students develop complex strategies to resist marginalization and maintain self-belief (McGee, 2015). Naveah's experience of being denied access to calculus due to structural limitations highlights how rural schooling can restrict opportunities for advanced coursework. At the same time, the experiences of Frank and Darius show that student outcomes in mathematics can vary. Darius maintained success throughout high school, while Frank faced a significant barrier in Geometry.

These stories echo existing research documenting curricular disparities between rural and non-rural schools (Showalter et al., 2019). Limited course offerings, reliance on online classes, and high teacher turnover often create fragmented learning experiences. For African American students, such variability is not just academic but identity-shaping. Success in one area can be overshadowed by struggles in another, leading students to adopt self-conceptions such as "not a math person" even when their performance demonstrates otherwise. The variability observed in this study underscores the importance of considering how rural schooling structures interact with identity development in mathematics.

The Centrality of Teacher Relationships

Participants consistently described teacher relationships as pivotal to their mathematics identities. Darius's story of affirmation from a Black teacher demonstrates how long-term, caring relationships can counteract stereotype threat and strengthen persistence. Conversely, Apollo and Frank's accounts of invisibility and discouragement show how lack of recognition can have lasting negative effects.

This finding aligns with prior scholarship emphasizing the relational dimensions of teaching (Martin, 2009). Mathematics is often framed as a neutral subject governed by rules and procedures, yet the participants' narratives make clear that relationships with teachers significantly influenced whether they saw themselves as capable mathematics learners. In rural schools, where students often have the same teacher across multiple years, these relationships are magnified. A teacher who provides affirmation across 3 consecutive years may profoundly shape a student's identity, while a teacher who dismisses or overlooks a student may reinforce feelings of inadequacy that persist long after high school.

The presence or absence of racially representative teachers also emerged as meaningful. Darius's positive experience with the only Black teacher he encountered highlights the power of representation in mathematics identity formation. For African American students in predominantly White rural schools, the racial identity of teachers can signal whether mathematics spaces are inclusive and affirming.

The Role of Peer Networks

Peer support was another critical factor in participants' persistence with mathematics. Nevaeh described study groups as a way to buffer anxiety and provide collective resilience, while Frank highlighted the isolation of being the only African American student in advanced classes. These contrasting experiences illustrate both the potential and limitations of peer networks in rural mathematics education.

Peer influence has long been recognized as important in identity development (Nasir, 2011). For students in rural contexts, where class sizes are small and peer groups are tightly knit, the presence of supportive peers can transform mathematics from an isolating subject into a communal one. However, when African American students are racially isolated in advanced tracks, the absence of peers who share their background can amplify the burden of representation and erode confidence. This study extends prior research by showing how peer networks in rural schools are shaped not only by academic ability but also by race and representation.

Limitations

This study, while rich in depth and context, was limited in scope. The five participants represent a specific region of the southern United States, and their stories may not capture the full range of rural African American students' experiences nationwide. Narrative inquiry prioritizes meaning over generalizability, and participants' retrospective accounts rely on memory and self-interpretation, which, while valuable, are inherently subjective. Future research might expand this work through longitudinal designs or comparative

studies across rural, suburban, and urban contexts to further illuminate how place and race intersect in mathematics identity development.

Implications

The findings point to several actionable implications for rural educators and school leaders. First, teachers must be intentional in affirming African American students' mathematical competence. Small gestures, such as calling on students regularly, providing detailed feedback, and acknowledging effort, can have disproportionate effects in rural contexts where relationships are magnified. Teacher preparation and professional development should therefore emphasize culturally responsive pedagogy and relational teaching practices that validate students' identities alongside their mathematical learning.

Second, schools should work to expand access to advanced mathematics coursework. Where in-person offerings are not feasible due to enrollment or staffing, schools must ensure that online courses are accompanied by structured support, such as on-site facilitators, tutoring, or peer study groups. Without these supports, online courses risk becoming another form of inequity for rural students.

Third, schools should create intentional peer support structures for African American students, particularly those in advanced mathematics tracks. This might include study groups, mentoring programs, or affinity spaces where students can share experiences and strategies. Such structures can counteract isolation and foster persistence in challenging coursework.

Fourth, rural districts should prioritize recruiting and retaining teachers of color, especially in mathematics. Representation matters for African American students, not only for role modeling but also for fostering inclusive classroom climates. While recruitment challenges in rural areas are well-documented, creative partnerships with teacher preparation programs, loan forgiveness initiatives, and "grow your own" programs may help address this need.

Implications for Policy

At the policy level, addressing disparities in rural mathematics education requires investments that go beyond infrastructure. Funding formulas should account for the additional costs of offering advanced coursework in small schools, whether through shared services, distance learning with support, or partnerships with local colleges. State-level policies should also incentivize schools to provide equitable access to rigorous mathematics courses, ensuring that rural students are not disadvantaged by geography.

Policymakers should also recognize the dual challenges faced by African American students in rural schools, who experience both racial marginalization and rural under-resourcing. Equity initiatives must therefore be tailored to address the intersection of race and rurality, rather than treating these as separate categories.

Recent policy trends reflect growing attention to rural equity, including broadband expansion, virtual learning support, and teacher retention initiatives (Azano et al., 2023; Xu, 2024). However, policy must

move beyond infrastructure to address human capital and relational dimensions of rural schooling (Yu et al., 2024). The COVID-19 pandemic made visible the compounded challenges of technological access and instructional support in rural mathematics education (Reimer & Hill, 2022). Equitable policy reform should ensure that African American students in rural areas not only gain access to advanced coursework but also encounter teachers who are culturally responsive, well-prepared, and sustained through long-term professional support. Investments that merge digital equity with human connection will be essential for advancing mathematics identity and achievement in rural schools.

Implications for Future Research

This study adds to a growing body of literature that highlights the experiences of African American students in rural contexts, a population often overlooked in educational research. Future research should build on these findings in several ways. First, longitudinal studies could trace how mathematics identities develop across time, from elementary school through college, capturing both continuity and change. Second, comparative studies across rural, suburban, and urban contexts could further illuminate the unique contributions of rurality to mathematics identity formation. Third, intervention studies are needed to examine the effectiveness of practices such as peer study groups, culturally responsive pedagogy, and teacher recruitment initiatives in improving outcomes for African American rural students.

Conclusion

This study examined the mathematics identities of five African American students—Apollo, Darius, Frank, Naveah, and Rosa—who were educated in rural schools. Through narrative inquiry, their stories revealed the complexity of mathematics learning in contexts shaped by race, rurality, and structural inequities. Rather than presenting a uniform picture of struggle or success, the participants' narratives illustrated variability across grade levels and content areas, the profound influence of teacher-student relationships, and the importance of peer networks for persistence.

At the center of these narratives was the role of recognition. When teachers affirmed students' efforts, adapted instruction, and cultivated caring relationships, students described themselves as capable and resilient mathematics learners. Conversely, when teachers ignored or dismissed them, students internalized invisibility and doubt. In small rural schools, where students often encounter the same teachers repeatedly, the impact of these relationships was amplified. Similarly, peers provided both protection and vulnerability: study groups and friendships offered solidarity, while racial isolation in advanced courses heightened pressure and eroded belonging.

These findings contribute to the broader literature by highlighting how mathematics identity is shaped not only by individual ability or motivation but by the intersection of race and rural schooling. For African American students, structural limitations such as limited course offerings intersect with social

dynamics that either affirm or undermine their identities. Understanding this intersection is critical for creating equitable mathematics opportunities in rural contexts.

The implications for educators and policymakers are clear. Rural schools must expand access to rigorous coursework, strengthen teacher-student relationships, cultivate peer support structures, and recruit and retain more teachers of color. Policy initiatives must also account for the compounded challenges of race and rurality, ensuring that African American students are not doubly marginalized.

Ultimately, the narratives of Apollo, Darius, Frank, Naveah, and Rosa remind us that mathematics education is not just about content mastery but about identity, belonging, and recognition. Creating rural mathematics classrooms where African American students are fully seen, supported, and challenged is both a matter of equity and a prerequisite for unlocking their full potential.

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About the Author

Austin Ferrell, Ed.D, MPA, is an Assistant Professor of Educational Studies and Assistant Dean in the College of Education, Health, and Behavioral Sciences at the University of Tennessee at Martin. A proud product of a rural community and first-generation college graduate, Dr. Ferrell's work centers on rural education, mathematics identity, qualitative research, teacher preparation, and educational equity. He has extensive experience as a teacher, higher education faculty member, and educational leader. His scholarship explores the experiences, identities, and voices of students and educators in rural and historically underserved communities.

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Tammy Willis, *Wood County Cooperative, Oklahoma*

Jacquelyn Purser, *University of Oklahoma*

Although coaching is a promising intervention for promoting implementation of evidence-based practices with fidelity, less is known about applications in rural locales, which have unique strengths and challenges, including access, personnel, and geographic limitations. Additionally, little is currently known about how to best support special education teachers in rural settings to effectively implement SEL curricula in general, and specifically Second Step®. We used a multi-phase, mixed methods design within a descriptive multiple-case study framework to examine how individual educators experienced targeted instructional coaching for the implementation of Second Step. This study is part of a larger, five-year project focused on developing and testing an explicit coaching model to support rural teachers' social emotional learning curriculum implementation. Findings indicate teachers increased fidelity of Second Step® implementation which led to improvements in inclusive practices, pedagogical skills, and educator confidence as well as increased student academic performance and social competencies. Implications for rural practice and future research directions are shared.

Keywords: Rural special education, social emotional learning, inclusive practices, rural mental health

Social-emotional learning (SEL) has become an essential part of educational programs, with research indicating its potential to enhance students' academic success, behavior, and long-term life outcomes (Cipriano et al., 2023). Since 2011, 12 meta-analyses have been conducted to examine the effectiveness of SEL interventions in multiple countries and contexts, all of which noted some positive effects on the development of social and emotional competencies, as well as learning engagement and academic performance. However, a lack of consensus remains on the moderators that impact outcomes, including the characteristics of locales, teachers implementing SEL curricula, and the students receiving SEL instruction (Durlak et al., 2011; Greenberg, 2023). Additionally, there are comparatively few studies that focus on implementing SEL interventions in rural schools or districts. For example, in their meta-analysis of 213 studies conducted from 1955 to 2007, Durlak and colleagues (2011) reported that only 15% of the SEL studies included rural schools. More recently, in the largest analysis of SEL intervention studies

to date, Cipriano and colleagues (2023) noted a mere 4.5% of the 424 studies reviewed were completed solely in rural locales. This is problematic, as nearly 20% of all students in the United States (US) attend rural schools (Showalter et al., 2023). Even fewer studies have evaluated SEL interventions for students with disabilities who benefit from specialized social, emotional, and behavioral instruction. A recent systematic review was completed to examine the effect of SEL interventions on the social-emotional competencies of students with disabilities, as well as the conditions most important to consider (Hassani & Schwab, 2021). Of the eleven studies that met the inclusion criteria, the impact on student social and emotional outcomes was varied. Both emotional and social/behavioral outcomes ranged from small to large effects, which were hypothesized to be a result of implementation fidelity.

Regardless of the setting and student sample, implementation fidelity is consistently discussed in the SEL literature as a variable that warrants further investigation to enhance outcomes. Program completion, adherence, and the quality of lesson delivery were examined. Teachers reported modifying the associated visuals or the format of activities, or adding components, to keep students engaged with the program. Teachers also reported that time constraints factored into their decision-making about how to present the program to their students. Additionally, the more administrators provided time-saving support (e.g., offering flexible schedules, helping to create materials, providing coaching), the more likely teachers were to adhere to the prescribed implementation strategy (Hunter et al., 2022). Identifying the key variables that impact teacher implementation of evidence-based SEL curriculum with fidelity, the degree to which a program is implemented as designed, will ultimately improve student outcomes (C Cipriano et al., 2023).

The challenge of implementing SEL curricula with fidelity is particularly critical in rural schools serving students with disabilities, where teachers often face unique constraints, including limited resources, professional isolation, and students with diverse and complex needs (Berry et al., 2011; Berry & Gravelle, 2013; Rude & Miller, 2018; Showalter et al., 2023). Despite these challenges, students with disabilities may be among those who benefit most from high-quality SEL instruction, as research suggests the program is particularly effective for students with pre-existing behavioral concerns (Low et al., 2015; 2019; Merrin & Low, 2023). Yet, the literature offers limited guidance on how to support teachers in achieving the implementation fidelity necessary for positive outcomes.

This study addresses a critical gap by examining a targeted coaching intervention designed to help rural special education teachers implement the Second Step® curriculum with fidelity. Considering the documented importance of implementation quality and the specific challenges rural special educators face, this study explored whether brief, non-evaluative coaching could enhance implementation fidelity while fitting within the time and resource constraints of rural settings.

Second Step® Curriculum

Second Step® is one of the most widely used SEL programs in American Schools, reaching over 26 million children in 45,000 schools across 50 states from preschool through middle school (Committee for Children, 2024a; Merrin & Low, 2023). Based on social learning theory, the program offers 20- to 45-

minute lessons, using evidence-based teaching methods such as modeling, guided practice, and scaffolded skill development (Frey et al., 2000). The program aims to equip students with “human skills they need to navigate their lives successfully” (Committee for Children, 2024b, para. 1). Despite its popularity and a strong theoretical foundation with positive student outcomes (Committee for Children, 2024a, 2024b), emerging research presents a complex picture of the effectiveness of Second Step®, showing both significant improvements in specific areas and essential limitations that warrant attention. Outcomes are heavily influenced by the quality of implementation (Gage, 2025; Gage et al., 2025). As a result, researchers have shifted focus towards the factors that affect successful program delivery, particularly the importance of teacher support and ongoing professional development in achieving positive student outcomes.

Coaching

Coaching is a professional learning activity that occurs consistently within the classroom context and is used to implement and extend the professional development and training that teachers receive (Cusmano & Preston, 2018). Several recent studies have been published that examine the effect of coaching on teacher implementation of specific SEL curricula. For example, the MyTeachingPartner coaching model was effective in improving the fidelity of teaching implementation for the 4Rs (i.e., Reading, Writing, Respect, & Resolution) intervention, thereby enhancing both social-emotional and academic student outcomes (Doyle, 2023). In a systematic review of 19 studies, Ulla and Poom-Valickis (2023) found that coaching was a significant contextual variable when considering the implementation quality of an SEL intervention. They noted strong empirical support for coaching to improve intervention implementation fidelity, but that generally comes with high cost and potentially short-term benefits related to the relational and temporal nature of coaching.

With respect to classroom management and climate, coaching incorporating a variety of feedback modalities (e.g., written, video, in-ear, emailed) has been successfully used to increase the implementation of evidence-based practices among special education teachers. These practices include behavior-specific praise (Ennis et al., 2020), opportunities to respond (Johnson et al., 2024), and teaching employment skills (Horn et al., 2020). Kretlow and Bartholomew’s (2010) review of coaching studies noted that teachers experienced the most success in coaching scenarios where they were provided with individual follow-up, support, and coaching after an initial professional development training. Quality coaching, regardless of the model, involves the use of well-trained coaches, emphasizes strategies to enhance student engagement, provides structured feedback, and is non-evaluative in nature (Thompson et al., 2012; Walters, 2014).

Although coaching is a promising practice for promoting implementation of evidence-based practices with fidelity, less is known about applications in rural locales, which have unique strengths and challenges, including access, personnel, and geographic limitations. Randolph and colleagues present three models that have been effective to support rural educators, eCoaching (immediate feedback to educator; Horn & Rock, 2022), iCoaching (relies on bug in ear technology to track the teacher and provide immediate feedback, Randolph & Duffy, 2019), and teacher dyad coaching (weekly team meetings with a

coach, Holbrook, 2017). These models have been tested in rural locales and show promise; however, replication and scaling are necessary to establish effective practice. Additionally, little is currently known about how to best support special education teachers in rural settings to effectively implement SEL curricula in general, and specifically Second Step®.

Study Purpose and Research Questions

This study is part of a larger, five-year project focused on developing and testing an explicit coaching model to support rural teachers' social emotional learning curriculum implementation. The purpose of this study is to examine the impact of a brief coaching model on teacher implementation of Second Step® and pedagogical fidelity in a rural public school setting with special education teachers. The following questions guided this study:

1. How does targeted instructional coaching improve the fidelity of Second Step® curriculum implementation among rural elementary special education teachers?
2. How do rural elementary special education teachers describe their experiences with coaching as it relates to their Second Step® curriculum implementation?
3. What specific components of the Second Step® curriculum present the greatest challenges for implementation among rural elementary special education teachers?
4. What relationship exists between implementation fidelity scores and teacher perceptions of effectiveness?

Method

This study employed a multi-phase, mixed methods design within a descriptive multiple-case study framework to examine how individual educators experienced targeted instructional coaching for the implementation of Second Step® (Yin, 2018). The design for the intervention consisted of collecting pre-interview qualitative data, followed by quantitative fidelity data collection and analysis, and then in-depth qualitative interviews that explored participants' experiences (Creswell, 2017). The rationale for the approach was twofold: quantitative fidelity scores provided objective measures of implementation changes, while qualitative interviews explained these changes through the voices of participants, revealing the mechanisms behind the numbers (Dewhirst et al., 2025; Mertens, 2023).

The case study methodology was particularly suitable for investigating this complex phenomenon within its natural setting, namely, a rural public day school implementing an evidence-based SEL curriculum with coaching support (Yin, 2018). While bounded by a single institutional setting, the study encompassed multiple individual cases, with each educator's coaching experience representing a distinct unit of analysis within the larger case (Creswell, 2017). This design allowed for both within-case and cross-case analysis, revealing patterns while preserving individual experiences.

Setting and Participants

This study represents the Development phase of a five-year research project that will create and test a coaching model to support the implementation of Second Step® Elementary® in high need rural districts. The project comprises three phases: Development (Years 1-2), Implementation (Years 3-4), and Sustainability (Year 5). The Development phase, which includes the current study, explores adoption barriers, identifies necessary implementation supports, and pilots these supports to help teachers deliver the curriculum with fidelity.

The study took place at Deep Pines School (pseudonym to maintain confidentiality), a public day school serving students with disabilities from preschool through grade 12 in a rural district in the southern United States. Deep Pines expressed interest in participating in the project and received a monetary incentive for research participation. Teachers received classroom supplies, dedicated iPads, and hot spots to participate in coaching. Deep Pines School serves five rural districts that operate under a shared services agreement when districts determine that the least restrictive environment for students with Individualized Education Program plans is a specialized school. This setting exemplified the challenges facing rural special education: 55% of the teachers worked under emergency, alternative, or non-traditional certifications, and over 85% of students qualified for free or reduced-price lunch programs. District superintendents identified interconnected challenges, including student behavioral issues, family substance abuse, and significant academic gaps. In addition to Deep Pines School, the special education corporative provided a continuum of special education and related services across the five participating districts. All five districts reported struggles with consistently implementing social, emotional, and behavioral support due to staff shortages, high turnover, and limited professional development opportunities. These factors significantly impeded SEL initiatives and were suggested as a reason why students were provided services at Deep Pines School rather than their zone schools.

Eight educators responsible for elementary SEL curriculum implementation (Kindergarten to Grade 5) agreed to participate in this study: four special education teachers and four administrators (including a special education director, principal, and two school psychologists serving five districts). Teachers were purposively selected (Punch, 2005) to represent varying experience levels (from first-year to 12-year veterans), certification status (certified and non-certified), and student populations (autism, behavioral needs, and multi-grade), allowing examination of how coaching supported different professional development needs while addressing similar implementation challenges. All participants were White, with administrators holding advanced degrees (Ph.D., Ed.D., Ed.S., or M.Ed.) and having 16 to 40 years of experience in special education. Teachers had more varied backgrounds, including degrees in psychology, education, business, and entrepreneurship, with experience ranging from 1 to 12 years in special education. Seven out of eight participants had previous SEL experience.

The coach for this study had over 30 years of experience teaching elementary grades and, most recently, served as a principal of an elementary school before retiring. They were familiar with the Second

Step® program, having implemented it in their classroom as a teacher and provided instructional support as a building administrator.

Procedures

Prior to the intervention, the research team conducted individual introductory meetings with all four participating teachers. These initial sessions served dual purposes: establishing rapport and trust, which are essential for effective coaching relationships, and configuring the technological infrastructure necessary for remote coaching delivery. Given the distance between the district and the nearest collaborating research university and the desire to avoid undue influence on instruction by adding another team member to the classroom, iPad-based video conferencing technology was used for both classroom observations and coaching conferences (Zoom®). The technology setup process ensured all teachers were comfortable with the equipment and procedures before formal observations began, minimizing potential disruptions to instruction and maximizing focus on implementation quality during the intervention period.

Coaching Intervention

Participants were asked by their principal to independently review the Second Step® training video and begin implementing lessons. Coaching began approximately 3 weeks after initial implementation to allow teachers to become familiar with the program on their own. The coaching intervention followed a structured four-phase cycle repeated over six or seven weekly observations. After verifying that teachers had reviewed the online training, the coach reviewed the teachers' implementation and had them submit their Second Step® implementation schedules at the start of the study. All observations were scheduled for Mondays to capture the first lesson of the week, in accordance with their building schedule.

Phase 1: Pre-Observation Preparation

Prior to each observation, the team made contact using a standardized pre-conference email template. This message, sent several days before the scheduled observation, served multiple purposes: confirming the observation date and time, requesting the specific lesson number the teacher planned to deliver, and scheduling the post-observation coaching session. The coach also shared the observation protocol with teachers, explaining the focus areas that would guide observations. After receiving the teacher's lesson details, the coach reviewed the related Second Step® lesson plan to prepare for a well-informed observation.

Phase 2: Classroom Observation

During the approximately 20-minute Second Step® lessons, the coach used the structured observation protocol to score implementation across three domains: (a) implementation fidelity, (b) teaching and engagement, and (c) climate and management. Additionally, the coach used a rubric to note specific examples of effective practices and areas that needed improvement, thereby creating a basis for the next

coaching conversation. This observation method focused on collecting descriptive data about implementation practices, classroom management, and classroom climate, allowing the coach to provide support to teachers through feedback rather than judgment on their performance.

Phase 3: Post-Observation Conference

Coaching sessions started with the coach expressing appreciation for teachers' efforts. Using the Teacher Observation Debrief Script (created to coordinate with the fidelity protocol), coaches systematically reviewed each focus area, offering both positive feedback and constructive suggestions based on specific observed examples. The conferences emphasized teacher strengths and a goal for growth. This structured yet flexible approach ensured thorough coverage while providing individualized support tailored to each teacher's needs. Post-conferences were brief, lasting approximately 10 minutes following each observation, and did not require extensive preparation on the part of the coach.

Phase 4: Follow-Up and Continuous Support

After each conference, the coach sent a follow-up email, summarizing the discussed strengths, growth areas, and agreed-upon next steps. This written record reinforced verbal feedback and provided teachers with a reference for applying the suggested strategies. Each observation was built on earlier coaching conversations, allowing coaches to offer more targeted support as teachers refined their practices. The coaching intervention relied on criterion-based rather than time-based completion, with coaches providing weekly support until teachers achieved predetermined fidelity benchmarks (90% or greater across each of the three domains). This resulted in differentiated intervention lengths: six weeks (T2, T4) and seven weeks (T1, T3), allowing for responsive, individualized professional development.

Data Sources and Instruments

Classroom-level data from the Second Step® data Dashboard, observation protocols, and semi-structured interviews were used as data sources, enhancing methodological rigor through triangulation (Yin, 2004).

Observation Protocol

The research team developed a comprehensive observation protocol to systematically evaluate the implementation of Second Step® across two key dimensions: program-specific fidelity and essential classroom supports. This dual focus reflects the reality that student outcomes depend on what is taught (curriculum content) and how it is taught (instructional strategies). The first section of the protocol assessed fidelity to core Second Step® components using a two-point scale (Observed, Not Observed, Not Applicable). This included preparation (with materials ready), sequential completion of lesson parts (Brain Builder, Getting Started, Practice, Check, and Performance Task, when applicable), and adherence to the script. This section yielded a maximum fidelity score of seven points if all the components were applicable.

If components were not applicable, the percentage was calculated based on the total number of applicable components (e.g., five/six applicable components = 83%). The second section, using the same scale, evaluated classroom supports through four categories derived from Second Step® resources (Committee for Children, 2022b, 2022c, 2022d): Teaching Practices (modeling, nonjudgmental responses, think time, plus at least two other evidence based strategies, that is, physical movement, turn and talk, whole class discussion, role playing, and other), Student Engagement (tailoring examples, checking comprehension, capturing attention, noticing engagement), Positive Classroom Climate (building relationships, creating safety, developing norms, responding to behaviors), and Classroom Management Strategies (uses an attention signal, breaks down directions for optional learning, provides opportunities to respond, partners students quickly and effectively, provides prompting and reminders, and provides behavior specific praise). This section contained a maximum score of 18 points, recording data to emphasize that effective SEL implementation requires both curriculum fidelity and supportive instructional conditions.

Implementation Fidelity Triage Framework

To systematically guide teachers toward 90% implementation fidelity, the research team developed a triage framework that prioritized coaching focus areas based on weighted importance and classroom needs. The framework divided implementation into three sections, each with a different weight: Lesson Implementation (40%), Teaching Practices & Engagement (30%), and Classroom Climate & Management (30%). The triage process followed a hierarchical decision tree. First, coaches assessed whether teachers achieved 90% fidelity in Lesson Implementation, which is the core Second Step® components, including *Brain Builder*, *Getting Started*, *Practice Activities*, *Final Check*, and *Performance Tasks* (if available). If this threshold was not met, coaching focused solely on these key elements, as they formed the essential foundation for program effectiveness.

For implementation fidelity, meeting 75% of milestones was considered basic implementation, 85% of milestones was considered proficient implementation, 90% of milestones was considered target implementation achievement, and 95% of milestones was considered distinguished achievement. Once teachers demonstrated 85% fidelity in *lesson implementation*, the coach identified a secondary focus. For classrooms facing engagement challenges, coaches prioritized *Teaching Practices & Engagement*, focusing on pedagogical practices such as modeling techniques, *Turn and Talk* activities, and comprehension checks. For teachers working to enhance classroom management, the coach emphasized pedagogical strategies, including setting clear expectations, using attention signals, and fostering positive relationships.

This structured approach enabled teachers to focus on one area for improvement while ensuring that resources were used efficiently. The review of the observation protocol helped track progress and guided subsequent coaching efforts until teachers reached the 90% fidelity target. Although 90% fidelity was the target, 95% fidelity was noted as Distinguished Implementation. The coach maintained detailed observation logs for all teachers, which included the observation and debriefing dates and times, the unit

and lesson numbers, lesson and support implementation scores, implementation milestones, and coaching priorities.

Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with four teachers and four administrators. Each participant was interviewed twice (except for two administrators, who were interviewed once each): once before the coaching intervention began and again after it was completed. All interviews were audio-recorded with participant permission, followed standardized procedures to ensure consistency, and included assurances of confidentiality. Administrator interviews followed a parallel structure to capture systems-level perspectives on the coaching intervention. The pre-coaching teacher protocol consisted of 17 questions across five domains, and the administrator protocol consisted of 15 questions across the same five domains. See Supplementary Material for interview protocols.

Data Analysis

Quantitative Data Analysis

The lesson number, date, and time spent on each lesson were retrieved and recorded for each classroom using the Second Step® data dashboard, and weekly coaching protocol scores were calculated. Quantitative analyses included descriptive statistics and percent change in criterion from lesson to lesson until mastery in each of the three domains was achieved. Results were graphed and reviewed weekly.

Qualitative Data Analysis

This study employed systematic inductive thematic analysis (Naeem et al., 2023; Saldaña, 2021) to analyze pre- and post-intervention interviews conducted with four special education teachers and four administrators. Thematic analysis was chosen because it allows researchers to identify "abstract and subtle expressions/patterns/processes that explain a phenomenon" (Mishra & Dey, 2022, p. 187), making it especially suitable for understanding complex implementation dynamics across multiple participant perspectives in case study research.

The analysis proceeded iteratively through four stages: initial coding, category development, theme building, and integrating findings across participant groups. First, line-by-line coding produced 168 codes from eight teacher interviews and 305 codes from six administrator interviews (Administrators three and four only completed pre-intervention interviews). These codes ranged from descriptive (e.g., "Teaching Experience - 12 years") to interpretive (e.g., "Confidence Growth through Validation"), each accompanied by supporting quotes and transcript references to ensure clear audit trails.

In the second phase, codes were organized into categories through an iterative sorting process. The teacher codes generated 15 categories that captured implementation approaches, student engagement, coaching experiences, and professional development. The administrator codes generated 24 categories that reflected system-level perspectives, including rural challenges, resource allocation, and

stakeholder coordination. The higher number of administrator categories reflected their focus on multiple stakeholder groups and system-wide considerations. Theme construction involved interpretive analysis guided by the question, "What story does this tell about the implementation experience?" Teacher categories were grouped into five themes, while administrator analysis produced eight themes. Post-intervention themes relied mainly on data from the two administrators who completed both interviews.

The final phase combined teacher and administrator themes to form five comprehensive themes that reflected both converging and diverging viewpoints: Adaptive Implementation as Professional Expertise, Transformation Through Non-Evaluative Coaching, Student-Centered Indicators of Success, Rural Context as Both Barrier and Advantage, and Sustainable Systems Through Professional Identity. See Supplementary Material for additional information on the data analysis process.

Trustworthiness and Reflexivity

The analysis used Lincoln and Guba's (1994) four criteria for trustworthiness. Credibility was established through the triangulation of administrator observations and teacher self-reports, with structured team discussions serving to challenge interpretations (Carter et al., 2014). Weekly team meetings examined various explanations for emerging patterns. Dependability was ensured through a thorough audit trail that documented the analytical process, which began with 473 codes and ultimately resulted in 39 categories, ultimately leading to five integrated themes. Dated analytical memos recorded decisional turning points, such as the realization that "rural constraints" paradoxically created certain implementation benefits. The team maintained detailed records of code definitions, category adjustments, and theme development, enabling external review of the analytical process (De Kleijn & Van Leeuwen, 2018).

Transferability was improved through detailed descriptions of the rural special education setting, including specific information about geographic isolation, resource shortages, and student demographics. These descriptions help readers evaluate the applicability of the findings to their own situations, while also understanding the unique combination of rurality and special education needs that influenced implementation. Confirmability was achieved through systematic researcher reflexivity. The research team included members with different levels of connection to the study context. The lead researcher, a special education professor and parent of a child with disabilities (though not a student in the study district), brought both professional expertise and personal investment in effective special education practices. This dual perspective encouraged regular self-reflection on assumptions about the distinction between "evidence-based practices" and "typical practice." The second researcher, an early childhood education professor without direct special education experience, provided critical distance and challenged assumptions about disabilities and teacher practice.

To manage these positionalities, the team implemented several safeguards. First, the coach who delivered the intervention was excluded from conducting post-intervention interviews and data analysis, preventing the conflation of implementation hopes with participant experiences. Second, the team used structured coding procedures to reveal and examine interpretive differences. Third, the team openly

acknowledged limitations, including missing post-intervention interview data from two administrators. Instead of overextending, themes reliant on post-intervention data were clearly identified as representing partial administrator perspectives. This transparency, paired with systematic reflexivity practices, enhanced confidence in the validity of the themes.

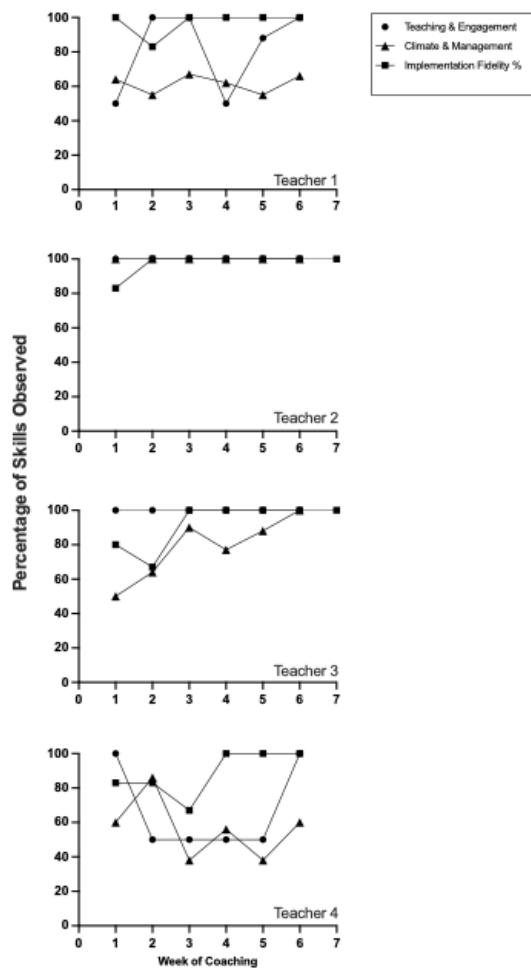
Results

Quantitative Findings

At the onset of the study, T4 had not begun Second Step® implementation, and T2 was completing four to five lessons each week (approximately one lesson per day). T1 and T3 were implementing each lesson in the entirety without adaptation. Teachers 1, 3, and 4 watched or rewatched the Second Step® introductory video and coaching began with teachers shortly after program implementation. See Figure 1 for Teacher Second Step® Observation Protocol Scores.

Figure 1

Teacher Second Step® Observation Protocol Scores



Teachers who began at a lower percentage of implementation fidelity made larger gains, and those that began at a higher percentage made gains and reached 100% fidelity faster. As shown in Table 1, T1 was observed to demonstrate implementation fidelity (100% accuracy) for all portions of the Second Step® program for every observation except one (observation week two, 83%). T2 began with 83% implementation fidelity at week one, but by week two was implementing all steps at 100% accuracy and continued with the same level of accuracy through week six. T3 was implementing 80% of steps in week one, decreased to 67% in week two, then increased to 100% in weeks three to six. T4 began at 83% in week one and week two, dropped to 67% in week three, and increased to 100% in weeks four to six. All teachers met the distinguished criteria for implementation fidelity at one point during the six observations and all teachers met 100% of criteria by the sixth observation.

Table 1*Coaching Results for Focus Area of Lesson Implementation*

Week	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Teacher 1	100	83	100	100	100	100	No data
Teacher 2	83	100*	100	100	80	100	100
Teacher 3	80	67	100	100	100	100	100
Teacher 4	83	83	67	100*	100	100	No data

As shown in Table 2, T1 was observed to meet the teaching and engagement standards at 50% in week one, increased to 100% in weeks two-three, 50% in week four, 88% in week five, and 100% in week six. T2 began at 100% and maintained this level through week six. T3 began with 100% accuracy for this area and kept that standard through week six. T4 was observed to meet the teaching and engagement standards at 100% in week one, but dropped to 50% for weeks two to five, then increased back to 100% in week six.

Table 2*Coaching Results for Focus Area of Teaching & Engagement*

Week	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Teacher 1	50	100	100	50	88	100	No data
Teacher 2	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
Teacher 3	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
Teacher 4	100	50	50	50	50	100	No data

As shown in Table 3, T1 was observed to meet the climate and management standards at 64% in week one, 55% in week two, 67% in week three, 62% in week four, 55% in week five, and 66% in week six. T2 began at 100% and maintained this level through week six. T3 began at 50% in week one, increased to 64% in week two, reached 90% in week three, decreased to 77% in week four, then increased to 88% in week five, and finally reached 100% in week six. T4 was observed to meet climate and management

standards with 60% accuracy in week one, 86% accuracy in week two, 38% accuracy in week three, 56% accuracy in week four, 38% accuracy in week five, and 60% accuracy in week six.

Table 3

Coaching Results for Focus Area of Climate & Management

Week	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Teacher 1	64	55	67	62	55	66	No data
Teacher 2	86	91	89	100	75	100	100
Teacher 3	50	64	90	77	88	100	100
Teacher 4	60	86	38	56	38	60	No data

Coaching sessions and feedback were brief, lasting nine to 15 minutes per session for a total of 75 to 90 minutes across the six or seven sessions. Coaching sections focused on teaching practices and classroom climate fidelity (12.5-16 minutes) were slightly longer than those focused on curriculum fidelity (nine-13 minutes).

Qualitative Findings

Analysis of pre- and post-intervention interviews with participants identified five main themes. These themes provide interconnected insights into the study's research questions. Themes One (Adaptive Implementation as Professional Expertise) and Two (Transformation Through Non-Evaluative Coaching) primarily explain how coaching improved fidelity (Research Question 1) by framing it as thoughtful adaptation rather than strict compliance for special education classrooms. Theme Two, along with Theme Five (Building Sustainable Systems Through Professional Identity), demonstrates how teachers experienced coaching (Research Question 2) as transformative, supportive, and non-evaluative, which built confidence and encouraged professional growth. Theme One thoroughly discusses specific implementation challenges and successes (Research Question 3), while Themes One, Three (Student-Centered Indicators of Success), and Five highlight the complex connection between fidelity and effectiveness (Research Question 4), showing that adaptive implementation guided by coaching resulted in better student outcomes than strict adherence to the curriculum.

Theme 1: Adaptive Implementation as Professional Expertise

The Necessity of Adaptation. Both teachers and administrators recognized that successfully implementing Second Step® required the thoughtful development of exemplars and scenarios, rather than strict adherence to the options available through the Second Step® program. A2 acknowledged the developmental mismatch: "I don't think it's at the level necessarily for the majority of our kids," yet supported differentiated implementation: "We're gonna meet them where they are, and then try to help them grow. And that's gonna look different for every kid." A1 praised creative adaptations she heard like implementing lessons during PE as "a brilliant idea," while A4's perspective as a school psychologist who travels across

five districts added another dimension to the adaptation necessity: "Since I go to all five districts, everything is done different." This inconsistency across the co-op created additional adaptation challenges, leading to A4's vision: "It would be awesome to have it across the co-op to have consistency to be able to work with our kids. The same things are being done here. And if we travel to the next location, it's very consistent and we can use the same type of words and program."

Core Adaptation Strategies. Teachers developed three main adaptation strategies (language modifications, timing adjustments, and activity restructuring). Every teacher adjusted language complexity. T1 explained: "I follow the script, but a lot of times I have to break the script down a little bit to explain some of the words or give an example because a lot of times my babies don't understand the exact wording." Teachers restructured pacing for attention spans. T1 implemented weekly repetition: "We take one lesson. And we do that one lesson every day for the week. So, they get the repetitiveness of it." T3 similarly broke lessons across days due to limited attention spans. Partner activities required a complete reimagining. T3 explained: "We don't do the turn and share with a partner because I don't have enough students that use spoken language at the level they would need to be," implementing whole-class discussions instead.

Specific Implementation Challenges. Beyond these core adaptations, two systemic challenges emerged across all classrooms: scenario relevance and engagement. Urban-centric scenarios consistently failed to connect. T3 had to "skip, like two or three slides before I could find a scenario that they could relate to," particularly struggling with substitute teacher scenarios in a setting where "our subs are people they know." A1 identified this as fundamental: "Second Step® was not validated on rural schools." In terms of engagement and attention, A2 observed: "It's not animated enough. It doesn't hold their attention." Teachers addressed this through visual supports, with T3 creating "actual human faces of all the different emotions" using photographs rather than cartoons because "the cartoons they kind of go off on cause cartoon to them is play."

Successful Components and Creative Solutions. Despite challenges, certain components proved universally effective. Mind Yeti emerged as the most successful element, with T3 reporting: "They love our Mind Yeti session every morning," contrasting this structured approach with previous ad-hoc attempts. Breathing techniques provided concrete tools, with T1 noting: "I have three kiddos that grip onto blowing in the bowl of soup when they get upset." Brain Builder activities also consistently engaged students across classrooms, becoming daily warm-ups that "got them engaged as a group together."

Theme 2: Transformation Through Non-Evaluative Coaching

The coaching model catalyzed professional transformation across experience levels, with both teachers and administrators emphasizing its non-evaluative, supportive nature as key to success. This theme reveals how coaching redefined professional development in rural special education settings.

From Resistance to Enthusiasm. The change in teacher attitudes was remarkable. A1 described the progression: "[The teachers] didn't really want to do the program, but they have seen the benefits... And

they enjoy it." Personal experiences showcased this shift. T1 went from "It makes me a nervous wreck" to "It was a positive experience, and it kept me motivated to keep going," specifically crediting this to knowing she "was doing it right." The non-evaluative stance proved essential. A1 stated: "[The teachers] thought it was, like, oh, they're coming to observe me and tell me I'm doing this wrong. And when they realize that's not what it was, then they were able to actually utilize the service."

Differentiated Professional Support. The coaching model addressed the individual needs of teachers. For T1, a 12-year veteran, coaching offered validation: "[The coach] would find things that... I do on a regular, everyday basis. And she would point out... that is so amazing that you do." This external validation was very meaningful in isolated settings where, as A2 noted, "It's good for them to hear it from someone else, because the superintendents don't come tell them that." For T2, a first-year teacher, coaching boosted confidence without overwhelming her. She appreciated coaches "not making me feel overwhelmed with it" and realized that adaptation was acceptable. T4's experience represented the most dramatic transformation. As non-certified staff with an AA in a different field, he was "thrown into" teaching mid-year when "we can't hire another teacher after the teacher left because he had some issues." He candidly admitted, "I had no clue what the heck I was doing. It helped me learn how to actually do teaching on stuff." The coaching provided T4 with fundamental pedagogical skills. He learned classroom management strategies that revolutionized his practice: "Like how different ways to say things to kids instead of just always saying the negative, say the positive." He gave specific examples: "Instead of saying stop doing this, say, 'Thank you, Johnny, for paying attention.'" This shift was revelatory: "I didn't even realize I was doing that until after I was told."

The Power of Immediate, Specific Feedback. Both groups emphasized the coaching model's immediate feedback structure as transformative. The weekly debriefs created iterative improvement cycles. T4 explained their value: "The debrief helped a whole lot... let me know, okay, you did this this week and then this the other week and then this is how you can improve this and how you can improve that." He actively used this feedback: "I write things down on what I can improve on and what needs to be fixed, maybe some suggestions here and there." T2 also found the immediate feedback particularly helpful: "Just the meeting afterwards was very helpful, and then I could know directly what I did that day, or even a small thing that I said that I might have not thought was very significant that actually was very helpful." This granular attention to detail helped teachers recognize their unconscious effective practices.

A2 identified the coaching model's uniqueness: "Typically, you don't get that with any other, we haven't with any other training." The administrator praised specific coaching elements: "For you guys to actually meet with the teachers and to do in the ear, do the tablet, and be able to start that coaching process... it shows that you're invested in trying to help them." The coaches' understanding of classroom complexity enhanced their credibility. A2 further noted that the coach understood "the big picture of the classroom and the responsibilities" while providing encouragement. This holistic understanding allowed coaches to provide relevant, actionable feedback rather than idealistic suggestions.

The findings suggest that teachers need direct support to use the full range of options for presenting scenarios and exemplars. T1 in pre-intervention interview said, "The program is pretty straightforward. You're given what to say. As long as you have common sense, you can follow the directions." However, she noted in her post interview that she may have needed more assistance than she had thought; she stated she worked with the coach on "adap[ting] it for my kiddos, so, um... a lot of the, like, turn and talk type things, we have to do as a class. like, I'll break down... some of the things that the script says to where it's more of what they can understand."

Theme 3: Student-Centered Indicators of Success

Both teachers and administrators measured the effectiveness of implementation through observable changes in student behavior rather than relying solely on curriculum completion metrics. Individual success stories served as powerful validation for the entire implementation effort, with both groups sharing remarkably specific examples of transformation.

Functional Improvements as Success Metrics. Teachers measured success by observing specific behavioral changes that enhanced students' daily functioning. T1's observation of vocabulary development was particularly striking: "My student flat out said, 'They're not sharing. It made me mad.' A month ago, it would have just been a big, huge meltdown. I think it's extremely important for my littles to learn the social emotional part." This verbal expression of emotion, rather than behavioral escalation, represented significant progress for students with autism in her class who struggled with communicating their feelings. T2 stated, "I find them conversing about it more on their own. I'll hear my kids say, oh, that's not a kind thing to do. Let's solve that problem together. It's really clicking with them." T4 documented comprehensive skill development in his students: "Most of them have adapted and used what we've learned, you know, especially the calming down, they'll go to like a certain corner or they'll start deep breathing or counting, and what can I get else, Mr. T4?" He observed metacognitive growth as students became aware of their emotional states: "They've kind of got in tune with their emotions and how to calm themselves down and you know what emotions you want and then noticing other people so that they can either stay away or help them if they need help." A1 observed skill generalization: "I've actually seen the kids utilize the skills that they have when they transition over to a different campus [student zone school]."

Engagement as Evidence. Student engagement shifts were significant. T3 reported: "We have a lot more back-and-forth conversation with the kids and can get through the entire teaching part in one session, whereas when I started it, we were only getting, like, 5-10 minutes." T2's students demonstrated advanced engagement by anticipating scripted questions before she asked. The transition from resistance to routine signified a major change, with T3 noting: "They don't put up a fight to come to the teaching session for Second Step® as much. It's become part of their routine."

Theme 4: Rural Context as Both Barrier and Unexpected Advantage

The rural special education setting created unique implementation dynamics that profoundly shaped the coaching and curriculum adaptation process. Both teachers and administrators identified remarkably similar challenges while discovering surprising benefits unique to their context.

Systemic Rural Barriers. Geographic isolation caused cascading effects. A1 quantified: "We are more than 60 miles from there [service centers]. We don't have the staff to cover the classes." Financial constraints forced difficult choices, with A2 explaining: "If you look at how many staff members we need to be able to keep our kids safe, loved, and understood. That's the largest part of our budget. And again, that takes away from curriculum." Technology infrastructure posed daily challenges. T4 reported: "We don't always have the best internet... There are days we had internet down." The multi-district collaboration added complexity, with students from "five different campuses" and "different admin coming in wanting different things."

Infrastructure Vacuum as Opportunity. Paradoxically, the lack of SEL programming created new opportunities. A1 described the baseline: "My teachers don't get anything... they've gone years and years and years without even a curriculum." This meant Second Step® did not compete with existing programs. Previous efforts were described as "lacking" with "no worthwhile outcomes," just "putting out the biggest fire." This gap allowed for a paradigm shift. A3 stressed that SEL skills "need to be explicitly taught and practiced," indicating an evolution in rural special education approaches.

Small Environment Benefits. Despite challenges, rural settings offered unexpected benefits. T2 found it easy to implement Second Step: "I couldn't imagine the chaos of a large school." Teachers praised exceptional administrative support. This support included daily check-ins and philosophical alignment. A2's main focus was ensuring students were "safe, loved, and we try to understand them. That's all that matters each day."

Theme 5: Building Sustainable Systems Through Professional Identity

The coaching process sparked lasting change that went beyond the intervention period through two linked mechanisms: the development of systematic institutional supports and the growth of teachers' professional identities. This dual transformation (structural and personal) created conditions for ongoing implementation despite the challenges inherent in rural special education settings.

At the administrative level, leaders developed concrete strategies to incorporate SEL into the fabric of their schools. A1 suggested using peer expertise through mentor teachers (i.e., ongoing coaches) who could share "the same tips that they got" with new staff, addressing the ongoing challenge of rural teacher turnover. A2 took a further step, advocating for both scheduling and policy integration. She emphasized that Second Step® would become non-negotiable: "That's gonna be part of your schedule," placing it alongside mandated services like PE and art. Most importantly, she advocated for embedding SEL into legal frameworks: "There has to be some SEL in every kid's BIP [Behavior Intervention Plan]. Every kid's

IEP." This policy incorporation would ensure continuity, regardless of staff changes, transforming SEL from an optional program into a vital component of special education services.

At the same time, teachers experienced deep identity shifts that made sustainability personally meaningful. T1's post-intervention advice to colleagues summed up this change: "Do it. Even if you don't think your kids will get it, some of them will." This acceptance of partial success as valuable marked a major shift from all-or-nothing thinking about curriculum implementation. Teachers began to view SEL not as an additional program, but as an essential part of their practice. T2 described this philosophical change: "We are nothing without our social-emotional skills. We can do math and reading all day, but if we're not getting along or solving problems with our peers, we're not really getting anywhere." This identity shift showed in teachers' enthusiasm to become mentors themselves. T1 offered to "give them pointers on how I adapted it for my kiddos... invite them to watch," while T3 planned to share her modifications "so that way they didn't have to go rewrite the script again." This willingness to share both successes and failures reflected newfound professional confidence and a commitment to collective improvement.

The evidence indicated that sustainability arises from the connection between external structures and internal motivation. T4, despite encountering significant implementation issues such as technology failures and insufficient training, showed genuine enthusiasm: "I actually enjoyed the whole process. I like doing Second Step." A1 noted steady but consistent improvement: "We just see an increase in their fidelity with implementing the program," indicating internalized commitment rather than simple compliance. T2's reflection captured the dual focus that made sustainability likely: "It just kind of helped show me how important it really is, and how much it's really changed the kids' mindsets, not only about learning, but about each other." This recognition of both student impact and professional growth suggested that SEL instruction had become a key part of teachers' professional identity, ensuring persistence beyond external support.

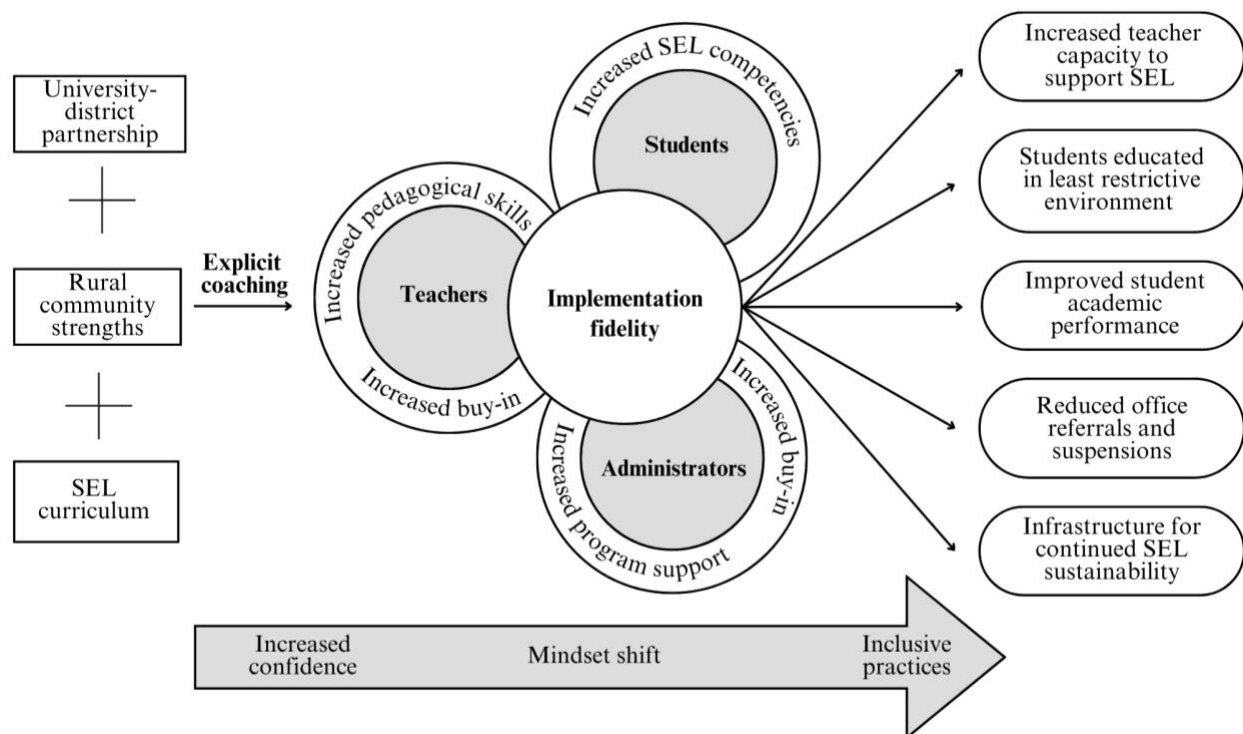
Discussion

A rich body of literature notes the positive impacts of SEL, including improved peer relationships, school functioning, and academic achievement (Cipriano et al., 2023). However, these gains have not been universally observed. Students receiving special education and related services have been understudied, particularly those from rural areas, where unique opportunities and challenges are prevalent (Berry & Gravelle, 2013; Rude & Miller, 2018). These contextual factors may play a role in overall program acceptance as well as implementation fidelity, a critical component of SEL effectiveness (Gage, 2025; Gage et al., 2025). The purpose of this study was to explore teacher coaching and the impact on implementation fidelity of Second Step® in a rural public school with special education teachers. The lessons learned from Deep Pines School provide insight into the needs of rural teachers implementing SEL curricula. Findings suggest that a brief, explicit coaching model was effective not only in increasing fidelity of implementation but also in improving classroom management and climate, ultimately leading to sustainable implementation.

To understand how the coaching intervention achieved these outcomes, a theory of change was developed to illustrate the mechanisms through which brief, targeted coaching can create lasting impact in rural special education settings (see Figure 2). This theory is derived from the mixed-methods findings and helps clarify the interconnected pathways from initial inputs to long-term outcomes. The theory identifies three essential inputs: (1) university/district partnership, which proved crucial for system-level support; (2) access to an evidence-based SEL curriculum (Second Step); and (3) rural community strengths (strong relationships among educators, nimble administration able to make programmatic changes, educators with deep ties to students and the community). These inputs catalyzed multiple simultaneous processes. At the administrative level, superintendents and building administrators developed a new perspective for viewing SEL as essential rather than optional. At the teacher level, increased buy-in emerged alongside improved pedagogical skills, leading to greater confidence and ultimately more inclusive practices. Students began to demonstrate improved SEL competencies, which reinforced teacher commitment. Critically, these changes prompted concrete planning for sustainability. The ultimate outcomes extend beyond immediate implementation success. As students transition to their zone schools, they are expected to show stronger SEL skills, improved academic results, and fewer disciplinary actions.

The shifts in mindset among teachers and administrators, from viewing SEL as inappropriate for students with disabilities to recognizing it as essential, create conditions for sustained implementation beyond the coaching period. The theory of change illuminates how the coaching intervention addressed multiple barriers simultaneously, as evidenced by the specific transformations observed at Deep Pines School. Prior to coaching, three of the teachers had watched the training video, while one teacher had neither watched the video nor begun implementation, despite being directed to do so by the administration. None of the teachers were aware that the program allowed for adaptations in scenarios to meet student needs. During pre-interviews, all the teachers expressed concern (prior to participating in coaching) that Second Step® is unlikely to be appropriate for their students. During post interviews, teachers shared that the program scenarios could be easily adapted and that students were able to actively participate in lessons with accommodations, including visual supports and activity modifications. One teacher shared that the reinforcement from coaching clarified that the practices she implemented were both evidence-based and effective.

Figure 2
Theory of Change



Perhaps most importantly, the coaching intervention fundamentally changed teachers' beliefs about their students' abilities. Before coaching, all teachers doubted that Second Step® was suitable for their students with disabilities. This deficit-focused perspective underwent significant shifts throughout the coaching process. Post-intervention interviews showed that teachers no longer just believed their students could benefit from the curriculum, but also actively supported its continuation. As T1 told colleagues: "Do it. Even if you don't think your kids will get it, some of them will." This shift from skepticism to advocacy marks a profound mindset change: teachers have moved from seeing their students through a lens of limitation to one of possibility. Such a change in beliefs is crucial, as teacher expectations greatly impact student outcomes.

Like many rural schools, Deep Pines faces significant resource shortages and limited time for professional development. The effectiveness of this coaching model has important implications for resource-limited rural schools. With only 75 to 90 minutes per teacher beyond regular instruction (including email communication, technology setup, and six to seven brief post-conferences), the intervention achieved impressive results. This small time investment led to: (1) all teachers exceeding 85% implementation fidelity, with most reaching 100%, (2) quick improvements in classroom management and climate for three out of four teachers; and (3) significant shifts in teacher beliefs about student potential. The maintained high level of treatment fidelity is a critical component that could explain differences in SEL treatment outcomes (Gage, 2025; Gage et al., 2025). The return on investment is especially notable since these 90 minutes of coaching triggered lasting changes in both teaching techniques and professional identity. For rural schools

with limited professional development time and resources, this model demonstrates that meaningful change can be achieved without requiring large time commitments. Instead, focused, non-evaluative coaching can produce substantial benefits when aligned with teachers' immediate needs and seamlessly integrated into their natural teaching environment.

Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, student-level academic data were not collected. Academic progress was reported by teachers and administrators. Students worked on individualized goals with individualized progress monitoring. Second, observations were not double-coded to support reliability. Third, teachers served students with a variety of support needs, which required different amounts of time and reinforcement to ensure student mastery of key concepts. This additional time for program implementation may not have been consistent across classrooms.

Future Directions

Future work should scale the coaching model and collect student-level data on academic and behavioral outcomes. This is particularly important for rural schools and for students with disabilities, who are among the most likely to benefit from SEL instruction but are also among the least likely to be included in research endeavors (Hassani & Schwab, 2021). Without further evaluating the use of interventions in rural communities, even those supported by research, such as SEL interventions, it is impossible to identify factors that may impact their effectiveness and acceptability in rural communities.

Conclusion

This case study illustrates the outcomes of a brief, explicit coaching intervention that led to fidelity in the implementation of the Second Step® SEL curriculum. Both teachers and administrators reported enhanced confidence and mindset shifts that ultimately lead to more inclusive practices. The authors wish to thank the teachers and administrators who opened their doors to their classrooms and generously shared their feedback to support the development of a brief coaching intervention to support SEL program implementation.

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About the Authors

Brittany Hott, Ph.D., BCBA-D, is a Professor of Special Education in the Department of Educational Psychology at the University of Oklahoma.

Courtney Dewhirst, Ph.D., is an Associate Professor of Early Childhood Education in the Department of Instructional Leadership and Academic Curriculum at the University of Oklahoma.

Julie Atwood, Ph.D., is a Research Scientist in the Center for Applied Social Research at the University of Oklahoma.

Tammy Willis, Ph.D., BCBA, LSSP, is the Director of Special Education for the Wood County Cooperative.

Jacquelyn Purser, M.Ed., is a special education doctoral student at the University of Oklahoma.

Ecologies Underlying Chronic Absenteeism in Rural Schools: Toward Strategic Leadership Intervention

Carol A. Mullen, *Virginia Tech*

Ashley D. Cannon, *Atkins Elementary and Sugar Grove Elementary School*

Chronic absenteeism in rural schools calls for strategic response from leaders. In this distinct context, an integrative review was guided by the research question, what do studies of chronic absenteeism in rural U.S. schools identify as factors, challenges, and strategies for leadership? Extant research on chronic absenteeism leaves a critical void in understanding the rural education–school leadership intersection and, specifically, factors that affect student absence and evidence-based counteractions.

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory undergirded this review wherein qualitative analysis of 107 peer-reviewed sources produced three themes: complex multifactor ecologies underlie chronic absenteeism; adverse childhood experiences affect school attendance and outcomes; and leadership influence and interventions target improved student performance. Findings could contribute to evidence-based programs for trauma-informed attendance strategies, community awareness of chronic absenteeism, and initiatives that build resilience. By exploring factors that contribute to absenteeism in rural schooling and preventative measures, this study aims to provide administrators, educators, and communities with actionable insights and low-cost solutions. Implications for practice, preparation, and research are discussed.

Keywords: adverse childhood experiences, chronic absenteeism, school leadership, rural U.S. schools

Chronic absenteeism and coinciding challenges for rural leadership necessitate interventions for mitigating this primary cause of underperformance. Adopting a whole-child view of attendance, an integrative review was guided by the research question, what do studies of chronic absenteeism in rural U.S. schools identify as factors, challenges, and strategies for leadership? Perspectives from educational leadership can enrich rural education research and practice.

As widely documented, when children in grade three are chronically absent, it is more likely that they will not read on grade level, will further disengage from learning and interactions, and will quit high school (Gottfried & Ansari, 2022; USDOE, 2025). Yet the plethora of studies on chronic absenteeism emphasizes urban and suburban areas more than rural areas (Swanson et al., 2025). This underexplored

area of chronic absenteeism as a challenge and opportunity for rural leadership motivated an educational leadership professor and elementary teacher in an Appalachian region to collaborate.

High absentee rates call upon school districts to increase attendance and performance by addressing root causes (Diliberti et al., 2025; Mullen & Fleming, 2024). An educational crisis, chronic absenteeism in the 2024–2025 school year exceeded pre-COVID levels (Diliberti et al., 2025; Swanson et al., 2025), from 16% to 30% of U.S. students (National Center for Homeless Education, 2017), affecting 16 million (1 in 3 students) by the end of 2022 (Attendance Works, 2023). In every type of community and at all economic levels, students' cognitive and socioemotional (SEL) development has been hampered, undermining their capacity to learn, engage, and graduate from high school (National Center for Homeless Education, 2017; Swanson et al., 2025). The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, 2015), attracting attention to absenteeism in rural areas, shifted focus to student achievement and strategies for improving graduation rates (U.S. Department of Education [USDOE], 2018). Even before the pandemic, school leaders were addressing chronic absenteeism, with many states including it in their ESSA accountability measures (Jordan & Miller, 2017). Dramatic increases in absenteeism are concerning given the well-established adverse effects on student development, performance, and outcomes (Gottfried, 2014).

Empirical research on the demographics of attendance has established that underlying demographic and systematic factors can perpetuate higher rates of absenteeism (Gottfried et al., 2021). Current studies have confirmed that rural schools face disproportionately high absenteeism rates compared with the national averages. For example, rates were higher for rural schools in California and Wyoming than urban and suburban students (Chang et al., 2018), and, in an Appalachian sample, almost half of 451 preschool children who missed 10% of school had lower literacy gains (Rhoad-Drogalis & Justice, 2018). In Virginia, chronically absent students performed 19% below their peers in reading and 26% in math in the 2023–2024 school year (Virginia Department of Education [VDOE], 2024).

Loss of learning significantly undermines students' outcomes in school, as well as their long-term performance and the health of economies (Gottfried, 2014; Tsevat et al., 2025). State, district, and school leaders have been tasked with responding to chronic absenteeism, such as by publicizing absenteeism data earlier in the school year (Attendance Works, 2024). The role of rural leadership is examined herein relative to consciousness-raising about key factors involved in chronic absenteeism and promising strategic responses. Actions taken must be consistent with the unique characteristics, challenges, and strengths of rural communities (Cox & Mullen, 2023; Mullen & Fleming, 2024; Thier et al., 2020). Beyond merely understanding geography, school leaders grapple with community identity and associated hopes and fears; the diminishment of coal production in Appalachia, which altered the region's identity, is one such example (Azano & Biddle, 2019).

Rural absenteeism as related to school leadership is underexplored, with few exceptions (e.g., Brenner et al., 2021; Grooms & Bohorquez, 2021), which makes it timely to study. By learning how chronic absenteeism and leadership responsibility intersect, school leaders can build collective awareness of core issues and better manage the factors at work in nonattendance and truancy. Actionable insights for trauma-

informed attendance must be met with targeted initiatives that protect and educate children. Through this analysis, robust strategies for making desirable changes that recognize rural community assets can become more widely known.

Regarding definitions, missing 10% of the academic year, which includes excused and unexcused absences and suspensions, is the measure most U.S. states use to determine *chronic absenteeism* (Rogers & Feller, 2018; USDOE, 2025). *Community*, another pertinent term, refers to the deep connection shared by many rural schools and communities, with community school models expanding services, partnerships, and resources while fostering strong relationships to support students. To meet needs, rural schools emphasize place-based education, which connects learning with the local community and builds on its assets (Azano & Biddle, 2019; Thier et al., 2021). These schools also engage in collaborative leadership through shared responsibility with the wider community to address local challenges, enhance learning opportunities, support commitments, and leverage collective strengths (California State Board of Education, 2022).

In general, any non-urban area is *rural* (U.S. Census Bureau, 2026), and rural schools are 25 or more miles from an urban area (National Center of Education Statistics [NCES], 2025). Up to one-half of schools in 26 states are rural (Showalter et al., 2019), and 28% of all public schools in the country are rural, enrolling 19% of students (NCES, 2022). In the Appalachian region, there are 107 rural counties and 840 outside it, yet 42% of the region's population is rural compared with 20% of the nation's. Rural counties are widespread, with over one-half in Appalachian high-density areas, mainly Georgia and Tennessee (Srygley et al., 2026). *Trauma-informed schools* respond to trauma with a safe and supportive environment that cultivates student wellbeing, resilience, and success through policies, practices, and staff training (National Child Traumatic Stress Network, 2017).

Theoretical Framework

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory (EST), an ecology of human development, undergirds this review. The framework arose from interest in environmental influences that affect how people develop within their environments and the various systems that influence them and that they in turn influence. As posited, five intersecting environmental systems impact growth: microsystem (family and school), mesosystem (linkages between microsystems, like parent–teacher interaction), exosystem (indirect external influences like a parent's job), macrosystem (cultural values and laws), and chronosystem (life changes). To understand development more fully, all environmental influences on a person are considered, extending to their impacts on experiences and surroundings. EST views the child as a dynamic entity that progressively moves into and restructures an environment, with the developmental process varying by place and time; culture and public policy influence the quality of their lives.

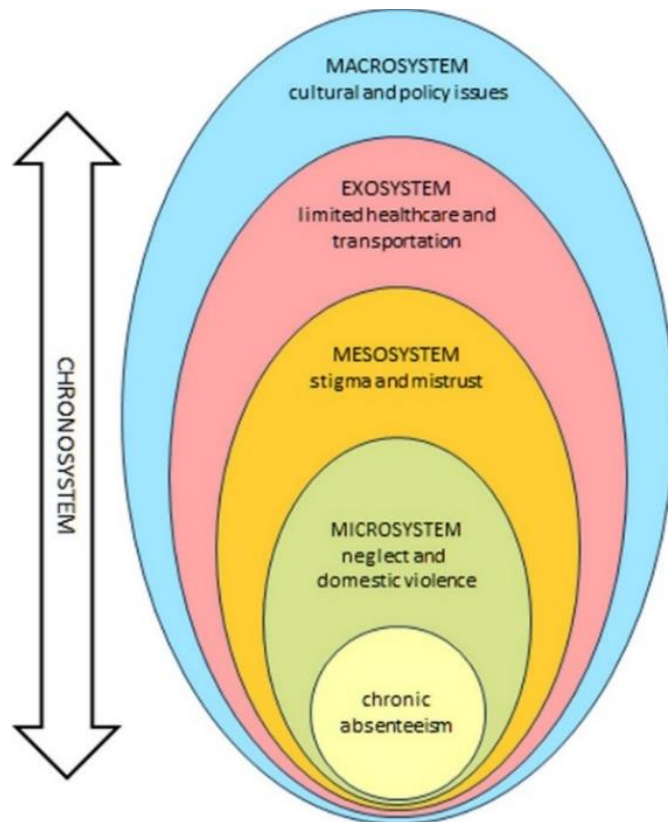
The whole-person approach to theory is being applied in this article to individual student growth in rural school communities whereby leveraging assets, such as local knowledge and relationships, focus on

strengths, not deficits, of place or person (Azano & Biddle, 2019; Brenner et al., 2021). The EST lens is useful for examining student attendance behavior from an ecological perspective on child-centered development and leadership support. In rural education contexts, chronic absenteeism is a complex problem that occurs within a system of relationships influenced by multiple environmental levels and potential developmental barriers. An EST interpretation of chronic absenteeism suggests not an isolated behavioral pattern but rather a multifaceted outcome formed by cumulative exposure to trauma and moderated by ecological systems and leadership influences unique to rural areas.

Figure 1 demonstrates how symptoms of chronic absenteeism manifest at different levels, as suggested by EST. Multiple systems that converge to shape absenteeism can be understood by school leaders and leveraged for intervention, such as child-centered resilience assets (Bellis et al., 2018). Chronic absenteeism necessitates preventative measures and leadership agency focused on strategies, programs, and policies that alleviate developmental harms from structural injustices for diverse student populations (Attendance Works, 2024; Bowerman, 2025).

Figure 1

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory (Mullen & Cannon, 2026)



Methods

An integrative review method was selected as the most appropriate literature analysis type to explore rural chronic absenteeism connected with adverse conditions, leadership, and interventions. This method allows for connections to be made among complex concepts. To enhance rigor, Whittemore and Knafl's (2005) framework for integrative reviews involving "problem identification, literature search, data evaluation, data analysis, and presentation" was followed (p. 549). Document analysis (Dalglish et al., 2020) and axial coding (Simmons, 2017) were applied to salient sources, which were Adams & Khojasteh (2018), Biddle & Azano (2016); Diliberti et al. (2022); Gottfried & Kirksey (2017), Gottfried et al. (2020), McCoy et al. (2017); Rhoad-Drogalis & Justice (2018), Robinson et al. (2018), Stempel et al. (2017), Stripling (2019); Swanson et al. (2025); Tabone et al. (2024). A list of search terms, databases, and yields follows (see Table 1). The document types analyzed and their counts were: peer-reviewed articles (74), research reports (25), books (4), book chapters in other books (4), and numerous public documents.

Table 1

Search Terms and Results by Database

Productive Search Terms	EBSCOhost	ERIC	APA PsycInfo	Google Scholar
Absenteeism + Rural School	81	179	103	No data
Absenteeism + Rural + Education	24	29	35	No data
Chronic Absenteeism + Education	89	105	130	No data
Chronic Absenteeism, Rural, Leadership	1	2	163	119
Chronic Absenteeism, Education, Rural, Leadership	1	2	322	74

Criteria, Analysis, and Trustworthiness

Peer-reviewed, full-text scholarly sources that address rural education, chronic absenteeism, and/or school leadership were characteristics sought for including studies in this review. Timelines and English as the publication language were other inclusion criteria. A combination of "chronic absenteeism," "rural school," and "leadership" produced hits. Library databases and internet engines were accessed in the search for contemporary literature (2015 to March 2026), with ESSA marking the initiating search year (2015). Additionally, the listings of rural education journals (e.g., *Theory & Practice in Rural Education*) were searched. Publications before 2015 were only included where supported with empirical data. EST was utilized in the interpretation of thematic results.

A scan of 657 abstracts of potential candidates for review led to a further narrowing to 107 peer-reviewed sources, which were read and reviewed. This sample reflects findings from child development, education, medicine, and psychiatry, which hint at the complexity of human life and schooling for rural

residents in environments burdened by structural inequities. Twelve of these studies, mainly quantitative, were more finely analyzed to unpack core issues.

Salient sources were coded and examined using Dalglish et al.'s (2020) READ approach (ready materials, extract data, analyze data, distill). Twenty deductive codes (e.g., chronic absenteeism = EQUI) arose from research questions, search terms, and initial review results, and 62 inductive codes (e.g., adverse childhood experiences = ACEs) followed through open coding.

The authors independently analyzed the data set (salient sources) applying deductive and inductive codes. Axial coding (Simmons, 2017) connected such concepts as chronic absenteeism, community, equity, leadership, rural education, and wellbeing (Simmons, 2017). Zoom meetings occurred from 2023 to 2025 to discuss codes and potential themes; on two of these occasions, three qualitative researchers engaged in member checking. After reviewing the methodological procedures and source selections, they judged the processes sound and interpretations authentic. Searches were updated to ensure timeliness and importance, as documented in analytic memos. This review approach fulfilled quality criteria by incorporating theoretical and diverse scholarship and meeting research standards for thoroughness and transparency.

Limitations

The focus on American research means that non-U.S. information was largely excluded due to national differences. Rural education laws and policies, including governmental structures, vary depending on context. This limitation directly impacts the study's scope and generalizability to rural schools outside the U.S., although selected international studies were included. Even though rural schools are diverse, some factors and trends are common to a country (Thomson Reuters Foundation and EduRural, 2019).

Thematic Analysis of Literature

Three themes addressing rural school attendance issues and responses were identified: (a) complex multifactor ecologies underlie chronic absenteeism; (b) ACEs affect school attendance and outcomes; and (c) leadership influence and interventions target improved student performance. Bronfenbrenner's theory of EST is woven into the results.

Complex Multifactor Ecologies Underlie Chronic Absenteeism

Focusing only on a current situation and isolating factors is potentially misleading, if not shortsighted. Rather, a complex ecology with multiple factors underlies rural absenteeism (Mullen & Fleming, 2024; Özcan, 2021). Bronfenbrenner's EST helps clarify this complexity by emphasizing that attendance behavior emerges from interacting environmental systems—family, school, community, and broader sociocultural conditions. As proposed by EST, the circumstances of habitual absence vary tremendously from student to student and across schools, even in the same district. Absenteeism often

begins during childhood (Gottfried, 2019), which frequently produces less favorable results in crucial developmental milestones, namely language development and literacy and numeracy skills (Gottfried, 2014; Jimenez et al., 2016; McCoy et al., 2017; Watts et al., 2018). Historic patterns of missing school are associated with cumulative and profound impacts on academic growth (Gottfried et al., 2021; McCoy et al., 2017), SEL wellbeing and behavior (Özcan, 2021), and success in life (Watts et al., 2018). Chronic absence has been correlated with lower performance (Berkowitz et al., 2017; Rhoad-Drogalis & Justice, 2018), increased dropout rates (Gottfried & Ansari, 2022), and diminished future opportunities (Gubbels et al., 2019).

Root causes of chronic absenteeism are often interrelated. Socioeconomic status (SES), race and ethnicity, and family background play a pivotal role in higher rates of absenteeism (Gottfried et al., 2021; Rhoad-Drogalis & Justice, 2018). Children from low SES backgrounds disproportionately miss school for one month or more every year (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2013; Chang & Romero, 2008). Transportation issues (Gottfried et al., 2021), health disparities (USDOE, 2023), food insecurity (Gubbels et al., 2019), limited access to support services, and unstable housing and homelessness are all more pronounced for rural students (Berkowitz et al., 2017; Mullen & Fleming, 2024; National Center for Homeless Education, 2017). Unique challenges are also brought about by personal health problems, insufficient support, withdrawal, academic failure, and trauma from ACEs (Diliberti et al., 2025). Students who suffer from anxiety and other social issues may find school interactions, routines, and expectations overwhelming or exhausting (Gottfried, 2014; Gottfried & Ansari, 2022).

Systemic school factors also contribute to chronic absenteeism (Kearney, 2021; Lenhoff & Pogodzinski, 2018). Inadequate staffing, fewer support resources, such as for mental health, or a lack of extracurricular offerings are problematic (Gubbels et al., 2019). Special interest clubs and activities enhance connection, thus overall school attendance can suffer without them (Bethell et al., 2017). All such conditions often reflect broader structural inequalities that affect schools in lower-income and rural areas where inadequate funding hinders the implementation of support services, such as counseling and academic interventions (Gottfried, 2014). Without supportive systems, a school's capacity to address academic, behavioral, and emotional needs is reduced (Chang & Romero, 2008; Stripling, 2019), particularly for students with personal or SES challenges (Gottfried & Ansari, 2022).

Negative school climate (Thapa et al., 2013) further compounds the risk of chronic absenteeism. Bullying, poor teacher–student relationships, and inadequate discipline practices all correlate with higher rates of absenteeism (Gottfried, 2014; Thapa et al., 2013). Anxiety, fear, or feeling unsafe from bullying can also destabilize performance, leading to withdrawal and attrition (Laith & Vaillancourt, 2022). Students in schools with low academic engagement and high levels of discipline are more likely to be chronically absent (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2013).

From an EST perspective, these patterns reflect how macro-level factors (e.g., economic instability, community violence), exosystem factors (e.g., parental work conditions), mesosystem factors (e.g., family–school relationships), and microsystem factors (e.g., classroom climate and peer interactions) converge to

shape attendance. Each day a student misses school, one or more issues are in play: macro-level factors (e.g., local transportation infrastructure and housing, community violence, trauma) (Gottfried et al., 2021), family-level factors (e.g., adult work schedules and relationships with school personnel), school-level factors (e.g., bus schedules, culture, and disciplinary policies), and student-level factors (e.g., feelings of safety, belonging, and engagement). Family factors, for example, may interfere with regular school attendance for some students from low SES backgrounds. The wellbeing of children, particularly in young families, is influenced by economic stability (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2021). Rural areas offer fewer jobs with a sustainable income, forcing many families to juggle low-paying jobs (Green, 2014). Between 2016 and 2022, 14.7% of Appalachian residents had an income under \$26,246 for parents with two children; Appalachia's unemployment and poverty are higher than other rural communities based on survey data from 2020–2024 (Srygley et al., 2026).

The strong influence of families on attendance in early schooling was underscored by Romero and Lee (2008), who found that 21% of kindergarten students in poverty were chronically absent. This trend was observed in broader student populations where those eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, an indicator of lower SES status, were more likely to miss more than 10 days of the school year (Chang et al., 2018). Health-related factors (e.g., malnutrition) in low SES households also correlate with higher school absenteeism (Rappaport et al., 2011). Poor housing conditions magnify health hazards, such as toxic mold, triggering asthma and other reactions (Mizan et al., 2011). Parental beliefs and histories, another critical family factor, influence attendance habits (Gottfried & Kirksey, 2017; Panisch et al., 2020). Parents may not value education, trust the adults in charge (Robinson et al., 2018), or know how many school days their child has missed (Gottfried et al., 2021; Rhoad-Drogalis & Justice, 2018). Robinson et al. (2018) thought that the failure of some parents to comprehend the importance of elementary attendance can delay interventionist work in schools.

ACEs Affect Student Attendance and Outcomes

ACEs—a largely invisible environmental factor impacting chronic absenteeism—can weigh heavily in academic trajectories. Maltreatment and exposure to family, school, and community stressors can also have substantial impact on children's health (Bellis et al., 2018). Occurring before age 18, stressors often arise from abuse, neglect, and household challenges (Loveday et al., 2022), which are commonly used ACE categories (e.g., Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2019).

Research consistently links children who have experienced two or more ACEs with an increased likelihood of chronic absenteeism (Bethell et al., 2014; Stempel et al., 2017). Stressful or traumatic events in childhood can have significant, long-lasting effects on physical and mental health, contributing to poor school attendance. Negative outcomes in adolescence and adulthood (e.g., chronic disease, mental illness, and substance abuse) can extend to discrimination, community violence, bullying, financial insecurity, or housing instability, among other adversities (Barnes et al., 2020; Bellis et al., 2018). Alarming, Crouch et al. (2019) discovered that children with four or more ACEs had higher odds of absenteeism,

disengagement, and grade repetition compared to peers with fewer ACEs. Similarly, chronic absenteeism was associated with multiple ACEs by Stempel et al. (2017), whose research further established that exposure to community violence can lead to underperformance.

EST offers a useful lens here, highlighting how ACEs operate across multiple environmental layers that shape students' development and attendance. From the EST perspective, stressors that manifest as ACEs can deeply affect children (Lin et al., 2021). While stressors do not automatically become ACEs due to protective factors (e.g., resilience) and mediating influences (e.g., social connectedness), stressors are common to ACEs. At the micro level of families, stressors include poverty, limited parental involvement and caregiving, single parenting, divorce, unreliable transportation, abuse, neglect, food insecurity, poor nutrition, transitional housing, somatic illness, lack of health insurance, incarceration, and death (Lin et al., 2021). ACEs have been found to exacerbate mental health issues (e.g., anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder), further detracting from academic focus (Gottfried, 2019; Stempel et al., 2017). ACEs can also have intergenerational effects, which intensifies the odds of trauma transmission. Parental history of ACEs, SES status, and housing arrangements can inhibit protective factors based on research involving 581 parents (Panisch et al., 2020).

ACE-related factors can affect the quality of educational experiences, with students exhibiting apathy, difficulty with emotional regulation, and trouble with friendships, which correlate with lower academic success (Attendance Works, 2018; Crouch, 2019). However, when ACE-exposed children feel a sense of belonging, safety, and emotional support at school, they are more likely to be in class and engage positively (Bethell et al., 2017; Gottfried & Ansari, 2022). Environmental factors also impact attendance in that exposure to violence or unsafe conditions in communities may lead to anxiety and social isolation (Gottfried, 2014).

Almost half of children, nationally, have experienced at least one ACE (Bethell et al., 2017; Stempel et al., 2017). ACE exposure not only hinders classroom performance and foundational academic competency but also potentially affects future progress and development, including long-term health and wellbeing (Stempel et al., 2017). Even a single ACE nearly doubles the likelihood of health-related chronic absenteeism (Stempel et al., 2017; Tsevat et al., 2025). Dysfunctional households are at a higher risk for chronic absenteeism and academic attrition (Bethell et al., 2014; Crouch et al., 2019; Stempel et al., 2017). Children who experience neglect and poverty are more likely to face behavioral challenges, including health-risk behaviors (e.g., smoking), which can disrupt school attendance (Felitti et al., 1998). Frequent absence from school has been associated with social alienation and noticeable declines in reading and math scores (Gottfried, 2019). Higher scores of ACEs on research instruments are linked with behavioral and academic challenges—children facing multiple ACEs may struggle with self-regulation, social interaction, and attention, which are critical for success (Jimenez et al., 2016), and emotional responses can manifest as avoidance behavior (Jones & Hoffman, 2023). Neurological responses to stress during critical developmental periods in brain regions responsible for cognitive processes can affect the ability to

regulate emotion (Jamil et al., 2025) and focus on learning tasks and information retention (Xu et al., 2020). Three or more ACEs can lead to lower academic and social performance for students (Stempel et al., 2017).

Adult testimonials further solidify cause for concern given the pervasiveness and impact of childhood adversity. In the U.S., findings from a large adult sample (214,157) indicated that childhood adversity crosses SES characteristics, but some individuals, based on self-reports, were at higher risk of experiencing ACEs: non-White, LGBTQ+, high school dropouts, earnings under \$15,000, and unemployed (Merrick et al., 2018). Sixty-four percent of U.S. adults reported experiencing at least one type of ACE before 18, with nearly one in six (17.3%) indicating exposure to four or more types of ACEs (Swedo, 2023). From Felitti et al.'s (1998) survey with 9,508 adults in a health clinic in California, exposure to ACEs, including intimate partner violence, carried a higher risk of death. The odds of developing chronic conditions, including multimorbidity, become more pronounced with the quantity of ACEs experienced. For example, a survey of 11,972 individuals in China found that rural, less educated adults were more likely to report four or more ACEs from their childhood (Lin et al., 2021). However, different studies with a focus on school attendance have established a strong association of ACE exposure with chronic absenteeism (Crouch et al., 2019). From a survey with 2,452 adults in Wales, Bellis et al. (2018) found that childhood health conditions and school absenteeism intensified with the number of ACEs reported. Using retrospective data, this connection was made by measuring the relationships between ACEs and personal history of health issues.

Associations among chronic absenteeism, ACEs, and demographic characteristics are complex and currently underexplored (Lin et al., 2021). Nonetheless, some studies claim that SES challenges contribute to the disproportionately higher prevalence of ACEs in rural areas, including abuse, neglect, parental substance use, and household instability (Bethell et al., 2017). Persistent poverty, inadequate healthcare infrastructure, and intergenerational trauma further exacerbate the risk of absence from school. SES factors create instability in students' lives, which affect school attendance and widen academic disparities in rural areas. According to Srygley et al. (2026), the challenges are pronounced in Appalachian regions, where social issues intersect to compound obstacles to regular school attendance; these communities fall below the national average in mental and physical health due to significantly higher rates of poverty, limited access to healthcare services, and lower levels of adult education.

Rural areas often face substantial limitations in mental healthcare due to a shortage of providers and for other reasons, and lower SES, among other factors, are significant barriers to accessing and affording care (Kepley & Streeter, 2018). In research on ACEs in rural and urban settings, Elder and Robinson (2018) found that the more ACEs a child has been exposed to, the higher their risk of chronic health problems, even premature death; Southwest Virginia's "violent mortality" level was found to be significantly higher than the nation's—65% of psychiatric patients in the area reported childhood trauma from assault and homicide. Also of great concern, the opioid epidemic's impact on ACEs in rural areas has led to higher instances of unstable housing, including foster placements, factors strongly associated with erratic school attendance (Meinhofer & Angleró-Díaz, 2019; Mullen & Fleming, 2024).

EST further illuminates chronic absenteeism as a trauma-responsive outcome embedded within overlapping environmental systems. Regarding Figure 1, at the microsystem level, through neglect, domestic violence, or other traumatic events, ACEs can impair children's ability to consistently attend and engage in school (De Kleijn & Van Leeuwen, 2018). At the mesosystem level, family–school interaction is frequently weakened by mistrust and “stigma around mental healthcare in rural areas” (Ober et al., 2025, p. 4), which heightens the need for trauma-informed infrastructures. However, rural schools often lack the trauma-informed support systems needed to address students' trauma-related needs, a gap highlighted in recent research on their limited infrastructures and implementation challenges (Tabone et al., 2024).

The ecosystem reflects broader structural barriers prevalent in rural areas (e.g., limited access to healthcare, transportation, and economic opportunity). Contextual stressors exacerbate the impact of ACEs by destabilizing students' lives, which can indirectly influence their attendance (Zulauf & Zinsser, 2019). The macrosystem (cultural values and norms and policy mandates) shapes local responses to childhood adversity. In rural areas, cultural stigmas surrounding mental health, intergenerational trauma, and political underinvestment in public services often limit systemic interventions and perpetuate cycles of absenteeism (Showalter et al., 2019). The chronosystem acknowledges how the intergenerational impact of ACEs within families and communities may affect school attendance trajectories. To counter the compounding influence of rural structural inequities that include ACEs, trauma-informed, targeted interventions and supports are needed.

Leadership Influence and Interventions Target Improved Student Performance

Trauma-responsive leadership and trauma-informed care are key mediating factors for influencing both ACEs and attendance behaviors. EST helps clarify this mediating role by showing how leadership actions shape the school-level microsystem and the family–school mesosystem conditions that support or hinder students' ability to attend and engage. A mindset, trauma-responsive leadership (Bowerman, 2025; Craig, 2015) calls upon rural practitioners to understand the research and have contextual knowledge of their communities so their actions will be evidence-based, impactful, and sustainable.

Rural leaders' feedback converges with the extant literature reviewed. Three studies (Cox & Mullen, 2023; Mitchell et al., 2025; Mullen & Fleming, 2024) have indicated a pressing need to enhance the performance of underprepared learners and different populations (e.g., emergent bilinguals), support students in poverty circumstances, and ensure access to highly qualified teachers. A need for equitable outcomes to be met through interventions and support services that are modified for diverse populations was further highlighted by 100 rural superintendent and principal survey respondents (Mitchell et al., 2025). Compassionate, protective interventions, mechanisms for monitoring punitive actions, and research-backed strategies help ensure that support systems meet rural students' unique needs. A core idea is to shift deficit thinking about rural communities to strengths-based thinking about the concept of place as a way forward, which focuses on identifying and mobilizing local assets, resources, and culture to drive sustainable community development (Biddle & Azano, 2016).

A child-centered perspective on attendance and growth in relation to school, family, community, and society is consistent with principles for trauma-informed care: safety, trustworthiness and transparency, peer support, collaboration, empowerment, and humility and responsiveness (Center for Health Care Strategies, 2026). Transformative action that leverages such frameworks and principles from psychological and healthcare sources can be directed toward reducing exposure to adversity and enhancing resilience for both children and adults. Taking a whole-person approach to trauma requires a host of cohesive interventions that benefit rural youth. Schuermann (2023) argued that rural school personnel must also be a beneficiary, given that they are increasingly at risk of burnout and attrition from traumatic events and caring for children in under-resourced locations.

Creating trauma-informed systems, a crucial leadership challenge in rural settings, involve implementing best practices, integrating SEL learning, and fostering strong community partnerships to address diverse student needs. These approaches leverage rural assets, such as close-knit family and community relationships (Biddle & Azano, 2016; Schuermann, 2023), as well as partnerships with pediatric providers, child welfare, juvenile justice, and organizations. Effective comprehensive support systems have optimal treatment and closer follow-up of individuals struggling from the effects of toxic stress. Educators do not typically specialize in healthcare, so consultation with pediatricians and other providers will bring attention to how to prevent or manage mental health problems that present through a range of emotional and behavioral changes (e.g., sadness, withdrawal, inattentiveness, suicidal thoughts; Ogundele, 2018). An environment of trust, safety, and support in school can mitigate the effects of trauma; ensure strong, supportive relationships between students and staff; and provide or facilitate mental health services to support emotional wellbeing (Daily et al., 2020; Kimberg & Wheeler, 2019). All such actions contribute to better attendance, performance, conduct, participation, outcomes, and health (Domitrovich et al., 2017; Dorado et al., 2016; Ogundele, 2018). Committed leadership teams build new relationships with the community, understanding that connectedness is a core strength of rural education (Azano & Biddle, 2019) and leverage point for reducing absenteeism (Kataoka et al., 2018). Counteracting trauma with “community resilience assets” is key for promoting healing, resiliency, and success, especially for populations with weak attendance records (Bellis et al., 2018, p. 1). Despite past or present problems, students can heal and even thrive in such educative spaces, ultimately leading to enhanced performance (Gottfried & Ansari, 2022) and wellbeing (Sources of Strength, 2025).

Trauma-informed schooling is a vital step in a broader attempt to guarantee that all students can learn in a protected and nurturing environment. Associated practices acknowledge that ACEs can affect a child’s ability to be in class, develop, and interact and that their schools play a key role in reducing harm and increasing support. ACEs are not the sole purview or responsibility of families and communities. Rather, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2019), building upon extant research, argued that crucial skills, such as SEL, must be taught in educational programs aimed at preventing ACEs and lessening their impact. Key programmatic components include monitoring and evaluation, mentoring and after-school activities, and sector involvement (e.g., youth organizations and social/health services) to facilitate the

influence of critical leadership on lives. For example, Sources of Strength (2025), an approved, evidence-based suicide prevention program, has partnered with thousands of schools in North America and some universities to promote wellbeing through adult advisors and peer leaders, with outcomes that suggest youth suicide reductions. Reporting high engagement in this strengths-based program for the 2023–2024 school year, Loudoun County Public Schools (2025), Virginia, combined Sources of Strength's focus on student resilience through healthy coping and positive relationships, with supports for mental health.

Targeting reduction of chronic absenteeism, a three-tiered approach from Attendance Works (2018) focuses on prevention, early intervention, and intensive support. To motivate students to be in school, the prevention tier directs attention to positive school climates and family engagement for which strategies like awareness campaigns and fostering belonging may be employed (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012). The early intervention tier identifies students who show signs of absenteeism and recommends specific supports, such as check-ins with counselors or mentors (Gottfried & Ansari, 2022). Aimed at chronic absentee behavior, the intensive intervention tier enlists schools to work closely with families, community organizations, and social services to address deeper issues that may be aggravating nonattendance (Chang & Romero, 2008).

Evidence-based training is essential for improving staff wellbeing and their capacity to support students (Schuermann, 2023). Childcare training and professional development enable educators to recognize trauma that presents as “disruptive” behaviors and constructively respond in ways that may reduce re-traumatization and increase resilience (Bowerman, 2025; Domitrovich et al., 2017). Key staff training elements are trauma education and impact, mindfulness strategies, coaching/mentoring supports, de-escalation techniques, a growth mindset, and cultural competence and equity (Bowerman, 2025). Trauma-informed care addresses childhood adversity in schools with staff who respond compassionately to challenging behaviors and communicate with medical specialists. Schools use resilience strategies and specific resources to reduce stress. Internet-based resources help with building trauma-informed environments (e.g., National Child Traumatic Stress Network, 2017). For example, school toolkits facilitate actions involving “absenteeism data,” “positive messages,” community awareness (USDOE, 2025). Professional resources are also available to rural schools (e.g., Center for Rural Education, 2025).

Furthermore, in trauma-informed environments, leaders and their teachers consult empirical research on ecological influences (family, school, community) that affect children's education, as well as symptoms of toxic stress that give rise to absenteeism. Through consciousness-raising policies and practices (National Child Traumatic Stress Network, 2017), as well as such data and instruments as ACE risk factor surveys (e.g., Merrick et al., 2018), they can better comprehend how psychological conditions may present as unwanted behaviors. Social conditions and risk factors like trauma, bullying, family dysfunction, academic pressure, and social media threats may externalize as behavioral or adjustment difficulties in classrooms (Arseneault, 2018). Partnerships with parents, specialists, and others promote goal setting, decision-making, optimal treatment, and follow-up in student cases involving chronic stress.

Low-cost strategies are recommended for countering chronic absenteeism in rural districts. Restorative approaches—which foster accountability, empathy, equity, and connection through such strategies as conflict resolution and inclusive dialogue—have improved student behaviors and engagement (Bowerman, 2025; Gregory et al., 2016). Another intervention type for boosting attendance is personalized messaging. In LIFT UP Attendance, Swanson et al. (2025) involved 47 districts in 16 states from 2022 to 2024, which “nudged” caregivers to send their child to school; they were sent timely updates about absences in addition to goal-setting strategies and encouragement. Students’ absences decreased by as much as 4.5% (over half a day in a school year), with the highest benefits for Indigenous groups, slight benefits for White students, and no significant effects for other populations. The modest gains from this nationwide investigation of chronic absenteeism imply that no one measure will likely work.

Personalized messaging, school–family partnerships, and incentives were used for elevating school presence and inclusion in K–12 Appalachian schools within a predominantly White division (Mullen & Fleming, 2024). A “culture of overload” was described by 17 principals and lead teachers alike due to such systematic problems as understaffing and pervasive needs. Across the 10 schools, interviewees described conditions giving rise to trauma in their school communities, with many students from “coal camps,” in residences without quality care, and with severe disabilities and medical conditions. Similar approaches were used to boost attendance and elevate inclusion in response to poverty and disrupted family units. Being in the classroom and learning from teachers were priorities, thus a family–school liaison, with oversight of parental involvement in education, monitored daily attendance. Additionally, children in low SES households received extra food from local feeding programs and on weekends, even though meals were provided to all students via the county’s Community Eligibility Provision. Also, attendance incentives for daily presence, which included field trips, brag tags, and classroom parties, were standard practice.

In such need-support climates, multi-pronged, integrated practices and interventions focus on meeting students’ psychological and other needs and reducing absenteeism. Accordingly, Stripling (2019) introduced an adaptive form of behavior education to school counselors to assist them with implementing an incentive program, which facilitates students’ skills building around positive relationships, coping, and self-regulation. The incentive program reduced daily absences but did not fully prevent chronic absenteeism.

Consequently, coordinating efforts across multiple areas is recommended for addressing absenteeism from different angles (Allensworth et al., 2020; Robinson et al., 2018). To improve attendance and academic outcomes, principals and principal supervisors must invest in professional development and teacher recruitment, retention, feedback, and coaching focused on attendance strategies (Cox & Mullen, 2023; Mullen & Fleming, 2024; Robinson et al., 2018). These leaders also play a crucial role in implementing and monitoring attendance policies to ensure they are consistently enforced and supportive of student needs (Smith, 2024). Demands on principals include codifying attendance expectations and making supports explicit (e.g., behavior management strategies, tailored interventions), and explaining policies to parents (Bartanen, 2020).

Not all guardians with a chronically absent child are aware of the extent of the problem, which is why attendance data and personalized reminders have worked in some situations (Rogers & Feller, 2018; Swanson et al., 2025). Consistent communication with parents, even if not attendance-focused, can also help reduce absenteeism (Bergman, 2015). Besides parents, collaborating with businesses, student organizations, faith leaders, social services, and law enforcement, as well as district and government agencies, mobilizes comprehensive support for attendance and performance (Berkowitz et al., 2017; Childs & Grooms, 2018; Klein et al., 2022). Countering chronic absenteeism necessitates student-specific personalized support plans and mentorship programs (Sebastian & Allensworth, 2020) and ease of transportation and, where possible, solutions to other challenges facing families (Gottfried et al., 2021).

As instructional leaders, principals emphasize data-driven practices to identify attendance patterns and develop targeted interventions (Cox & Mullen, 2023). Collaborating with teachers to implement engaging and relevant curricula, they create a school environment where students feel that attending is beneficial and directly tied to success (Dinsdale, 2017). This approach involves noticing and supporting individuals who are frequently absent, thereby proactively working to keep students engaged in school (Mullen & Fleming, 2024).

Effective district policies address barriers that commonly contribute to absenteeism, such as food insecurity (Crouch et al., 2019; Gottfried, 2019), unreliable transportation (Susman-Stillman et al., 2018), and limited access to healthcare (Stempel et al., 2017). Culturally sensitive practices build trust through respect for families' values and beliefs, which encourage participation in decision-making and strengthen linkages between home and school (Barbosa & Coneway, 2023; Stefanski et al., 2016). For students facing disrupted lessons and attendance in remote learning situations, district investment in broadband infrastructure and technology facilitates educational equity and continuity (Smith, 2024). Training rural educators to implement trauma-informed practices and act on early warning signs of disengagement supports an integrated approach to improving attendance and educational outcomes (Allensworth et al., 2020; Frankland, 2021). All interventions on behalf of families require strategic coordination, such as with partners and local organizations, to provide essential services, including meal programs, transportation assistance, and mental health support (Mullen & Fleming, 2024).

Discussion and Implications

In response to the research question posed, literature on chronic absenteeism addressed specific factors, challenges, and strategies, which underscored the complexity of this problem for leadership in many rural areas. Root causes of student absence were described, with some specificity about evidence-based interventions and practices, although the descriptions were more general.

EST was used by the authors to map student development in relation to chronic absenteeism. Review of extant research uncovered complex multifactor ecologies in association with chronic absenteeism; ACEs affect school attendance and outcomes; and leadership influence and interventions

target student performance. Thematic findings, seen through the EST lens, reinforced the crucial role of schools, families, and communities in ACE-afflicted rural environments where every student must be learning, protected, and nurtured. Positive school cultures described as need-support climates are environmentally supportive, engaging places where adults intervene on behalf of every child so they can flourish (Stempel et al., 2017).

Practice

In the growing interest in underlying factors that contribute to chronic absenteeism, all involved must be held accountable. While chronic absenteeism's root causes are often multifaceted and may originate outside schools, rural districts play a critical role in mitigating the impact and reducing the number of days missed. Families and individuals have more influence than schools in determining attendance, according to Lenhoff and Podgodzinski (2018), which makes it even more critical that school personnel exert strong influence. For example, multiple options are advised for working with rural families to accommodate preferences for communication and engaging in services; inviting their perspectives on different issues that include their child's health and behavior is also key (Ober et al., 2025).

Outside factors that schools have the inability to change, such as social and family issues, can contribute to how programs are initiated and how they hold students accountable (Lenhoff & Pogodzinski, 2018). Barriers that inhibit families from sending their children to school should be met with leadership solutions that facilitate home and school linkages (Adams & Khojasteh, 2018; Gottfried et al., 2021).

Educational systems are encouraged to rely on community-based resources, such as services that help with mental or physical health and after-school programs. Collaboration with families and community organizations is key for targeting areas of support to promote and sustain positive attendance. Strategies for countering absenteeism include staff training and professional development, data-driven decision-making, positive attendance cultures, school-family-community partnerships, early intervention and monitoring, personalizing messaging, incentives, attractive opportunities, and services addressing health and wellness needs.

Preparation

Ecological frameworks like EST can be used to help guide aspiring leaders' and teachers' understanding of how environmental systems link with leadership challenges to influence rural attendance behavior. University courses and district training programs are well positioned to guide consciousness-raising and sensitivity around the complexity of chronic absenteeism in rural areas. Teacher and leader preparation for work in rural K–12 districts with excessive attendance issues could benefit from knowledge of evidence-based and promising practices for all staff (Regional Educational Laboratory Southwest, 2025).

Mental and physical health support, trauma awareness, and resilience strategies are core areas of preparation. To address specific challenges in schools, a host of strategies are introduced to preservice practitioners that include data-driven intervention, skills in collaboration and community partnership, consultation with providers, and relationship building with students and caregivers. Such preparation would

expose them to attendance policies, early warning and monitoring systems, nudging and other low-cost behavioral interventions, student mentoring programs and youth organizations, tiered interventions, school climate, and family engagement.

Research

There is a growing call for research in rural education to identify practices and policies that enhance the strengths of rural life (Crouch et al., 2019; Showalter et al., 2019). Such sources recognize the unique dynamics of rural culture and distinct needs of students within their familial, cultural, and economic ecologies (NCES, 2025). More illustrative examples of beneficial rural practices, complete with steps and outcomes for promoting student resilience and wellbeing, would be useful in the difficult work of rural leadership. A resounding message was that robust promising practices for countering chronic absenteeism must be linked with partnership, policy, and leadership. State and federal policies targeting rural absenteeism need to be assessed relative to their impact and scalability in rural districts, as well as their capacity to adapt to the evolution of societal trends, community needs, and technological changes.

New investigations could further illuminate cultural and familial dynamics (e.g., community ties, family expectations, and stigma surrounding absenteeism) and how these influence attendance rates for children of all ages in rural contexts (Crouch et al., 2019; Stefanski et al., 2016). Because transportation infrastructure, or the lack thereof, poses significant challenges in many rural areas (Attendance Works, 2018; Gottfried et al., 2021), innovative solutions like community-based transportation programs should be evaluated. Trauma-informed practices and school-based mental health programs need ongoing assessment of their effectiveness (Gottfried, 2019; Stempel et al., 2017; Stanzak & Oliver-Lemieux, 2023). Other areas of further study include parent–school relationships and strategies for fostering stronger engagement and addressing intergenerational poverty (Barbosa & Coneway, 2023). Research on how best to support the attendance and flourishing of diverse populations is another direction.

Conclusion

A one-size-fits-all approach to preventing chronic absenteeism is insufficient, particularly in rural contexts where challenges and assets differ markedly. Bronfenbrenner's EST underscores this point by showing that students' attendance behaviors emerge from interactions across multiple environmental layers—from family and school to community conditions and broader social forces.

Therefore, rural school leaders are encouraged to adopt multifaceted, locally responsive strategies that address root causes and leverage strong community ties. Because excessive absenteeism undermines performance, graduation prospects, and long-term wellbeing, rural districts require targeted, community-anchored solutions that reflect their unique environmental, cultural, and economic conditions.

External factors like ACEs, parental mistrust, and persistent stigma surrounding mental health exert a powerful influence on attendance in rural settings. Through the EST lens, these stressors operate across micro-, meso-, and exosystem levels, shaping students' daily experiences and capacity to attend school.

Yet leadership plays a critical mediating role: rural principals and district teams shape the climate, partnerships, and trauma-informed systems that make regular attendance possible. Their decisions directly determine whether schools become protective, connected environments that counteract adversity rather than reproduce it.

Findings from this review can raise awareness of the complex ecologies shaping chronic absenteeism and reinforce the need for evidence-based, trauma-informed interventions that build resilience. Such insights can strengthen preparation programs and support practicing rural leaders as they work to address deep-rooted barriers to attendance and promote more equitable outcomes.

Ultimately, EST highlights why an ecological perspective is vital: chronic absenteeism in rural areas reflects layered, interacting systems rather than isolated problems. The intricate conditions underlying chronic absenteeism in rural areas call for strategic, place-conscious leadership. Such leadership integrates community assets, coordinates cross-sector supports, and fosters school cultures where every student is known, supported, and present.

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About the Authors

Carol A. Mullen, Ph.D., is Professor of Educational Leadership at Virginia Tech, School of Education, and a Fulbright Senior Scholar alumnus. She uses equity and policy lenses in mentoring research and practice, and studies rural and international issues for schools. Her latest books are *Equity in School Mentoring and Induction* (2025, Springer) and *Improving Your College Courses* (2026, Myers Education Press, coedited). She has published 30 books, over 250 articles and chapters in others' books, and 18 guest-edited special issues. Editor Emerita of *Mentoring & Tutoring*, she is also past president of three national organizations, including the University Council for Educational Administration, which honored her with the Jay Scribner Mentoring and Master Professor awards. In 2026, she received the American Educational Research Association (Division A) Excellence in Research Award. She serves as a faculty lead in Virginia Tech's interinstitutional partnership with National Technical University, Ukraine.

Ashley D. Cannon, Ed.D., is a graduate of the Educational Leadership and Policy Studies program, Virginia Tech. She is a physical education teacher/designee administrator at both Atkins Elementary and Sugar Grove Elementary School, Smyth County Public Schools, Virginia. Her research interest is in rural education and timely issues for school communities. In 2026, she coauthored an article on rural school leadership published in *American Journal of Qualitative Research*.

The Role of Place for Rural School Leaders in Appalachian Virginia

Charles L. Lowery, *Virginia Tech*

This qualitative inquiry examines the multifaceted role that the concept of place holds in the professional identities and administrative practices of rural school leaders in Appalachian Virginia. These educational settings often are marked by distinct challenges, such as geographic isolation, resource limitations, and a perceived disconnect from macro-level policy decisions. Through a basic qualitative inquiry involving 12 school leaders across six southwestern Virginia divisions, the study explores how rural leaders perceive and address such complexities through a place-based lens. I utilize a researcher-developed tripartite theoretical framework of *active aspects of place as practiced space*, which includes *mētis*, or local or place-oriented practical intelligence; *terroir*, the socio-cultural connection derived from place; and *bricolage*, the creative repurposing of place-bound assets when formal resources are scarce. The findings indicate that place-consciousness is fundamental to rurally responsive leadership, as participants leverage community history, local culture, and rural capital to implement educative initiatives. These efforts enhance students' sense of belonging and make academic learning more relevant. Despite obstacles related to state standards and funding, leaders employ deeply relational community partnerships and improvisational praxis to make decisions and engage community-based assets. Ultimately, the study suggests that a place-conscious approach is essential for sustaining successful leadership and educational practices in rural communities.

Keywords: *bricolage, mētis, place-based education, rural school leadership, terroir*

The concept of place is multidimensional with profound theoretical implications. It has been examined across many disciplines, such as geography, sociology, anthropology, and environmental psychology. Far from being static, place emerges as an active province of ideas shaped by the interplay of physical environments, personal interactions, and social experiences. Physical attributes of a space influence the nature and depth of social connections, which, in turn, imbue the environment with meaning and significance. These layers of interaction are further enriched by subjective experiences—emotions, memories, and personal narratives—that forge a deeper and more personal connection to place, making it both a physical and emotional anchor in human lives.

Understanding place is crucial to how school leaders approach decision-making and problem-solving. K-12 schools, regardless of how rural or remote, are not isolated or insular entities; they exist as part of broader ecological systems, intricately tied to their spatial and temporal contexts while remaining subject to external influences. The physical setting of a school, coupled with the social interactions among

students, educators, leaders, caregivers, and the surrounding community, actively shapes its culture and learning environment. These interactions, enriched by the subjective experiences of individuals within the rural context, inform how stakeholders navigate both external pressures and internal challenges. As a result, the dynamics of a school environment emerge as a unique synthesis of these interconnected elements, fostering an educational setting that reflects and responds to its broader context.

Applying the concept of place to rural K-12 schools offers valuable insights into the unique characteristics, challenges, and opportunities these educational environments face. Rural areas are often defined by distinctive geographical attributes—expansive landscapes, natural features, and lower population density—that profoundly shape the experiences of those who learn and teach within them. The physical setting of a rural school not only influences how teachers and students engage with the natural environment but also fosters a unique sense of place that permeates the broader educational experience. This connection extends beyond the classroom, encompassing the interactions and relationships of all stakeholders who contribute to the school's cultural and ecological identity.

Recognizing how the physical characteristics of a place shape the rural school environment can provide valuable insights into how leaders identify and leverage local assets and resources. In close-knit rural communities, where relationships and social cohesion often play a central role, the social dynamics of leadership are deeply influenced by these connections. Community engagement, shared values and worldviews, a strong sense of relatedness, and local traditions and histories become integral to the identity of both the school and its leaders. These elements not only shape the culture of the rural school but also inform the leadership approaches of principals and superintendents, particularly in fostering public relations, strengthening parent partnerships, and navigating external community relationships. In this way, the unique social fabric of rural communities becomes a critical driver of collaborative and place-conscious leadership.

Place, when expressed as a rural setting, holds profound cultural and communal significance. Rural K-12 schools often serve as the heart of their communities, hosting everything from sporting events and family gatherings to homecomings and cherished cultural traditions. The school building, the Friday night football field, and the surrounding landscape become living symbols of historical, cultural, and ecological importance. For students and educators alike, these settings cultivate a unique sense of belonging, shaped by shared memories and deeply personal connections to the community. Effective school leadership recognizes and honors these ties, leveraging them to foster an environment that reflects and respects the socio-cultural and personal identities of those it serves. By doing so, leaders create spaces where students, educators, and communities alike can thrive, woven in the rich tapestry of their shared selves—what Dewey (1916/2001) called one's "mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience (p. 91)".

With that in mind, the purpose of this study is to explore the multifaceted dimensions of place as practiced space within a rural school context, examining how rurality as place shapes and challenges rural educational leaders. In short, this means interrogating the roles that both place and sense of place play in school leadership practice in rural settings. A nuanced understanding of place enables educational leaders

to address issues such as limited resources by tapping into local assets and to reframe perceived isolation through the strengths of community and culture. The central questions guiding this inquiry are:

1. How do rural educational leaders construct their professional identities in relation to the multifaceted dimensions of place (i.e., the active aspects of place)?
2. In what ways does a rural leader's understanding of place influence their administration of the school-community environment—specifically regarding their “place-thinking, place-doing, and place-knowing”?
3. How do rural educational leaders navigate the practiced space of rurality to leverage local assets (opportunities) while addressing resource limitations and isolation (challenges)?

To guide this exploration, I establish a framework for understanding the critical aspects of place, followed by an examination of how traditional ideas can inform new conceptualizations of place. My discussion then turns to rural place matters, emphasizing its unique cultural, social, and ecological significance. Study discoveries are organized around key themes: the impact and importance of place, place-based educational initiatives, community connection and involvement, student sense of belonging, local challenges and support systems, and leadership praxis and partnership building. The paper concludes with a discussion on rural responsiveness in educational leadership, advocating for a place-conscious approach that promotes the transformative potential of school leadership in rural communities.

Aspects of Place

Place is “the social, built, and natural context in which individuals are situated, and to which they ascribe meaning” (Armstrong & Stedman, 2019, p. 95). As a scholarly concept, place provides a critical lens through which people interpret their locally-defined social experiences and cultural worlds (Cresswell, 1996; Tuan, 1977). Cresswell (1996) acknowledged a significant gap in the social sciences, observing that connections between place and people are often overlooked: “Class, gender, and race are often treated as if they happened on the head of a pin” (p. 11). Similarly, Azano (2011) asserted that rural schools are too often merely framed as places that are “fraught with poverty [with] limited access to educational equity” (p. 8). This oversight is especially relevant in education, where concerns about class, race, and gender are deeply intertwined with how individuals understand and experience place (Azano & Stewart, 2015; Corbett & Gereluk, 2020; Hallinger & Liu, 2016).

Active Aspects for Conceptualizing Place

I propose that place can be examined through three critical lenses of place-conscious practice: *bricolage*, *métis*, and *terroir*. These frameworks—bricolage (Jenlink, 2006; Lévi-Strauss, 1966; Young & Eddy-Spicer, 2019), *métis* (Scott, 1998; Yahn, 2017), and *terroir* (Howley & Howley, 2014)—can be applied as active, place-based ways of thinking and doing. Originally, these concepts were conceived in isolation as separate, unintegrated notions with no specific typology in mind. However, I argue that, taken together,

mētis, terroir, and bricolage offer a nuanced perspective on theorizing place-based leadership, especially within resource-limited, remote rural schools.

Bricolage has been well established as a way of understanding how school leaders adapt and innovate by “making do” with available means and materials, treating them as assets when formal resources are scarce. Mētis (a Greek term, distinct from the Canadian Indigenous people with this name) refers to the practical, local intelligence that one draws upon for place-conscious decision-making and problem-solving. Terroir, borrowed from viticulture, emphasizes the socio-cultural *essence* of place. It informs leaders’ responses to the unique challenges of their schools’ contexts. By combining these concepts, informed by years of work and study in rural schools and place-based thinking, I offer an original theory that intersects with leaders’ praxis of reflection and action, cultivating responsive, ecological, and improvisational approaches to problem-solving and community engagement.

Bricolage

Lévi-Strauss (1966) defined bricolage as *making do* with the assets and resources that are *at hand*, a concept that has garnered interest in organizational management and leadership (Perkmann & Spicer, 2014) as well as education (Jenlink, 2006). Bricolage refers to the creative repurposing of existing materials to solve problems, often in situations where resources are limited (Baker & Nelson, 2005; Perkmann & Spicer, 2014). Unlike standardized approaches, bricolage relies on improvisation and situational adaptability (Lévi-Strauss, 1966). It is particularly relevant in contexts marked by environmental constraints (Baker & Nelson, 2005), evolving societal needs (Zollo et al., 2018), and complex, uncertain conditions (Eddy-Spicer et al., 2021).

Jenlink (2006) argued that bricolage is especially fitting for understanding educational leadership, where school leaders face “a myriad of complex problems—problems that reflect the increasing diversity of a changing society, the press of political agendas, and the expectations of a public that is more and more concerned with the quality of education its children receive” (p. 60). He reframed the school leader as a bricoleur, emphasizing their need to navigate uncertainty and equity-related challenges using an improvised “toolkit” of skills and support systems. In this context, bricolage does not demand groundbreaking innovation but instead highlights practical, adaptable responses to immediate challenges (Jenlink, 2006; Gojny-Zbierowska & Zbierowski, 2021; Lui et al., 2018).

The realities of school leadership often reflect fragmented, rapid, and improvisational work. Lunenburg (2010) described it as “fragmented, rapid fire, voluminous, allowing little time for quiet reflection” (p. 5). Leaders frequently employ cognitive and technical skills to address uncertainties, plan under constraints, interact with diverse stakeholders, and organize accessible resources. For instance, studies on school principals’ responses to the crisis illustrate bricolage in action (Hess & Lowery, 2021; Lowery & Hess, 2022; Lowery et al., 2023). Principals expressed feeling unprepared and lacking financial or human resources to support students and staff affected by trauma. Yet, they *cobbled together* responses by

leveraging whatever resources were available to meet school-community needs, exemplifying bricolage as a means of *patchworking* solutions (Hess & Lowery, 2021; Lowery et al., 2023).

Mētis

Educational leadership in rural areas implies having a practical sense of place, requiring leaders to operate within local contexts often outside the bounds of formalized state policies. Scott (1998) defined *mētis* as “practical skills, . . . common sense, experience, a knack” (p. 311), emphasizing practical knowledge rooted in a meaning-laden environment, or “indigenous technical knowledge” (p. 313). Similarly, Yahn (2017) described *mētis* as “a form of local knowledge indigenous to place and gained from an intimate understanding of the context and problem” (p. 65).

Mētis encompasses “practical skills and intelligence” applied in response to dynamic natural and human environments (Scott, 1998; Yahn, 2017). It requires leaders *to read* (decode and comprehend) their situations and act with informed, context-specific decisions that balance intuition with experience. This adaptability is central to success in complex and changing scenarios. As Scott (1998) noted, “making the best out of limited resources” involves skills that are difficult to codify as rigid disciplines (p. 315).

Beyond individual action, *mētis* also applies to social interactions, manifesting in both competition and collaboration as a “practiced responsiveness born of experience” (Scott, 1998, p. 314). It bridges intellectual knowledge (*episteme*) with skillful application (*techne*), offering a framework for decision-making and problem-solving in context-rich environments. At its core, *mētis* captures the interplay between local, practical knowledge and universal principles, aligning conceptually with *bricolage* (Scott, 1998).

Terroir

In viticulture, *terroir* refers to the geographical indications of a wine, shaped by factors such as location, climate, and especially soil, which influences grape flavor more than other fruits (Howley & Howley, 2014; Meloni & Swinnen, 2018; Pellechia, 2018). The term is both contentious and complex, often used to describe qualities that are otherwise inexpressible or indefinable (Meloni & Swinnen, 2018; Pellechia, 2018). Craig and Aimee Howley (2014) first applied this term to rural educational research, calling such place-oriented research “an act of *terroir*” (p. 7). They linked this concept of *terroir* to research as an art and a conversation with place, both an act of transgression and an act of engaging in a shared reality. According to the Howleys, *terroir* was what gave research in rural settings its unique flavor. Rural educational leadership can also be labeled as “an act of *terroir*,” a praxis of conversing and sharing with others through a sense of place (Azano, 2011; Schafft & Jackson, 2010). School leaders frequently engage with intuitive, place-defined approaches rooted in place—one might say, in the location, climate, and soil of the rural school. These “gut” approaches depend on instincts that are more than mere reflex.

In education, *terroir* can be seen as the socio-cultural background and professional wisdom shaped by one’s connection to place over time. Teachers often attribute exceptional instructional moments to intuition, but such actions are likely the result of ingrained habits and skills developed through practice and experience (Pretz, 2011; Sanger, 2010; Sipman et al., 2019; Sipman et al., 2021). For school leaders, this

professional wisdom manifests as socio-culturally informed habits of thought and decision-making, drawn from their repertoire of experiences. These habits enable leaders to solve complex problems in ways that reflect the unique “flavor” of their community and environment, grounding their actions in the rich context of place.

Why Rural Aspects of Place Matter

Rural schools face unique and often accentuated challenges (Azano, 2011; Biddle & Azano, 2016; Billmayer et al., 2020; Black et al., 2000; Bolton, 2017; Corbett & Tinkam, 2015; Showalter et al., 2019). These include perceived “cultural” limitations, difficulties in leadership for quality assurance, school closures, challenges in coordinating interschool collaboration, and the management of systemic change (Dowling, 2008; Slee & Miller, 2015). Billmayer et al. (2020) emphasized that “the equality aspect is especially accentuated in rural areas which, unlike metropolitan regions, often have significant difficulties related to long distances between schools, lack of qualified teachers and problems filling the classroom due to diminishing birthrates” (p. 1). Rural schools, particularly on an international scale, often lack access to resources such as libraries, museums, science centers, mental health services, advanced medical care, and robust social networks, which are viewed as more readily available in metropolitan areas (Hallinger & Lui, 2016; Hossain, 2016; Miller et al., 2019; Mulkeen, 2005).

Moreover, rural school leaders are often more vulnerable to external pressures, including a disconnect between macro-policy decisions and the local realities of rural education (Johnson & Howley, 2015; Lavalley, 2018; Papastephanou, 2019; Tieken & Montgomery, 2021; Wei & Tse, 2021; Weston, 2022). As Samoff (2013) explained, “education necessarily reflects, and simultaneously is in tension with, the structure of the national political economy” (p. 58). These tensions shape how leaders address educational challenges and work to foster equity amidst far-reaching policy controls (Beech, 2019; Sanchez & Rivas, 2021; Showalter et al., 2019; Stadelmann-Steffen, 2012). Even with shifts toward local or state-level control, such as the shift from No Child Left Behind (NCLB) to the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) in the U.S., the lingering effects of centralized policies may continue to influence rural education mindsets.

Methodology

Research Design

This study is framed as a basic qualitative inquiry (Ellis & Hart, 2023) aimed at understanding how rural educational leaders construct meaning within their professional roles. While the study draws on ethnographic techniques—such as prolonged engagement through fieldnotes and journaling—to capture the cultural nuances of the rural setting, it is primarily a multisite qualitative study rather than a traditional bounded case study, though elements of case analysis were considered (Fusch et al., 2017; Jones-Hooker & Tyndall, 2023). According to Kahlke (2014), basic qualitative studies often use this type of methodological mixology, “draw[ing] on the strengths of established methodologies while maintaining the flexibility that

makes generic approaches attractive to researchers whose studies do not fall neatly within a particular established methodology” (p. 39). The bounded system of the inquiry can then be understood as regional, defined by an existing consortium of rural schools located within the Appalachian region of southwestern Virginia.

Participant Selection and Case Definition

This study examines rural schools in southwestern (Appalachian) Virginia, exploring the perceptions of 12 school leaders regarding how a sense of place influences educational decision-making and problem-solving. Participants included five superintendents, one assistant superintendent, five principals, and one assistant principal. Purposeful sampling was employed to select “information-rich” cases that effectively illustrated the phenomenon of interest (Patton, 2015). This meant recruiting participants who could speak directly to rural school leadership as a place-based practice. Key informants, or “gatekeepers,” were engaged to help identify suitable participants and provide additional cultural and contextual insights (Marshall & Rossman, 2016).

Data Collection

Data collection was conducted using semi-structured interviews and in-the-field observations. Semi-structured interviews consisted of open-ended questions and probing follow-ups, enabling an understanding of the phenomenon under investigation (Patton, 2015). Tailored interview protocols were developed for each participant group, with confidential sessions lasting approximately 60 minutes. Interviews were conducted on-site or at a location chosen by participants for their comfort and convenience. Field observations during multiple school and community visits enriched the qualitative inquiry (Patton, 2015), including impromptu interactions and guided tours with school leaders lasting 45 to 120 minutes. Observations were documented through detailed field journaling and note-taking. Additionally, participants shared relevant documents, such as principal meeting agendas, leadership memoranda, and local newspaper articles, which provided critical context and supported data triangulation (Bowen, 2009).

Data Analysis

Data analysis involved multiple coding cycles: open, axial, and selective coding. This multi-cycle coding process (Saldaña & Omasta, 2018) used an initial inductive cycle to capture emergent participant meanings, followed by a deductive cycle aligned with the active aspects of place as an emerging theory, to illustrate the framework’s conceptual depth. Open coding was used in the inductive cycle to identify key ideas and categories, using process, values, and in vivo coding techniques (Saldaña & Omasta, 2018). Axial coding, drawing on deductive reasoning, was employed to refine and connect these categories, uncovering commonalities across interviews and observational data (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Selective coding synthesized these patterns into overarching themes, offering rich descriptions and emergent explanations (Gibbs, 2018).

Atlas.ti qualitative data analysis software facilitated the organization, labeling, and comparative analysis of data (Patton, 2015). This tool proved essential for managing the coding process and synthesizing my discoveries (i.e., findings) into cohesive themes. Analysis combined inductive and deductive methods, organizing emergent codes into thematic units aligned with the framework of Active Aspects of Place as Practiced Space. These thematic units included *bricolage* (place-thinking and place-doing), *mētis* (place-knowing), and *terroir* (place-being).

The final analysis resulted in six discoveries, which I present as themes: 1) Impact and Importance of Place, 2) Place-Based Educational Initiatives, 3) Community Connection and Involvement, 4) Fostering Students' Sense of Belonging, 5) Local Challenges and Support Systems, and 6) Leadership Praxis as Partnership Building. These themes provide a community-oriented understanding of how place influences educational leadership and decision-making through *bricolage* (place-thinking and place-doing), *terroir* (place-becoming and place-being), and *mētis* (place-knowing).

Discoveries

Impact and Importance of Place

When asked to reflect on their understanding of *place* in an academic sense, rural school leaders described it as a concept deeply integrated with their identity and practices. They emphasized that a thorough understanding of their community's history, culture, and environment empowers them to make decisions that serve not only the school but the broader community. This type of place-thinking or *bricolage* demonstrated a heightened sense of place that shaped their leadership identity and informed their practical framings for addressing challenges and fostering meaningful connections, or what could be called "place-doing." Place was integral to their decision-making process. As one principal asserted,

Place is crucial. It's the context within which we operate, and it shapes everything we do. Understanding the community's history, values, and needs helps me make informed decisions that benefit our students and the community. For example, we've implemented place-based education projects that utilize local resources and knowledge, which has been very impactful.

This response suggested that school leaders' understanding of their community's historical and cultural context impacts their practice and can even drive educational initiatives.

Another principal discussed *place* in terms of incorporating local history and geography into the curriculum. He stated,

Our community's values, history, and environment shape our school's identity. We integrate local history and geography into our curriculum to make learning more relevant to our students. We also collaborate with local organizations to provide resources and support that align with our community's needs.

In some ways, this illustrates how school identity was intertwined with the local context. This leader's response also hinted at how leveraging community resources enhances educational relevance and support for students.

One superintendent in the study reflected on how their understanding of place influenced personal relationships with others within the school-community setting. They shared,

I grew up in a rural area myself, so I understand the unique challenges and opportunities that come with it. I've always felt a strong connection to rural communities. Being a part of this community allows me to build strong relationships with students, parents, and local organizations. It's about more than just the school; it's about being an integral part of the community.

The leader's deep personal connection to the rural community shapes not only their relationships within the community but also their ability to connect locally with others.

A high school principal shared that the geographical and historical context of their community would often guide his leadership decisions. In his words,

Place is a fundamental aspect of our approach. It shapes our identity and informs our decisions. We've implemented various initiatives that leverage local resources and knowledge. For example, we have a program that involves students in local environmental projects, which not only educates them about ecology but also fosters a sense of stewardship for their surroundings.

This example demonstrated how the notion of place-becoming and place-being are inherent to place-based initiatives. The educator and educational leader's sense of being in a place undergirds and informs the educational endeavor of allowing students to engage in becoming connected to the place—as their responsibility and a source of resources. In the view of this school leader, it not only enhanced educational outcomes but also instilled a sense of moral obligation and connection to the local environment.

Overall, the importance of place was deeply ingrained in rural educational leaders' administrative practices. By understanding and leveraging the unique historical, cultural, and environmental context of their communities, these leaders create more relevant, supportive, and impactful educational experiences for their students. Their understanding of the emotional and psychological attachment people, including the self, have to specific locations was essential to their lived experience as a school leader and an educator. It provided a foundation, whether spoken or unspoken, to personal and communal connections, memories, and identities tied to their particular geographic environments.

Place-Based Education Initiatives

Participants implemented a variety of place-based education projects, including local history initiatives, environmental stewardship programs, and partnerships with local businesses. By leveraging local resources and knowledge, these projects made education more relevant and engaging for students. Leaders noted that these initiatives not only enriched academic learning but also instilled a sense of pride and responsibility in students, strengthening their connection to the community.

One principal shared an innovative approach to integrating local agricultural practices into the curriculum, explaining, “We’ve partnered with local farms to create a curriculum that teaches students about sustainable farming practices. Students visit the farms, learn directly from farmers, and even start their own small garden at the school.” This hands-on learning experience not only connected students to their community’s context but also tied their education to the region’s economic activities, enhancing its relevance and engagement.

Another rural Appalachian principal shared a project focused on environmental stewardship. She stated,

Our environmental stewardship program involves students in various activities like tree planting and river clean-ups in collaboration with local environmental groups. These projects teach students about conservation and sustainability while fostering a sense of responsibility towards their local environment. It’s an excellent way to integrate local issues into the curriculum and make learning more meaningful.

Projects like this exemplify how leaders perceive the importance of place, demonstrating how students not only learn about conservation and sustainability but also develop a sense of responsibility toward their local environment. By embedding local environmental issues into the curriculum, these programs make learning more meaningful and impactful.

A superintendent shared a successful place-based project that connected students to the community’s historical heritage, explaining, “One of our most successful projects is our local history initiative. We collaborate with local historians to develop a curriculum that includes field trips to historical sites and guest lectures.” Through this initiative, students gained a deeper understanding of the area’s history and its influence on the present, enriching their historical knowledge while fostering a sense of pride and connection to their community.

A principal described how she enriched the curriculum by integrating local cultural traditions into the school’s arts program. She explained, “We invited community artists to teach workshops and collaborate with students on projects....It’s been incredibly beneficial in making the arts program more vibrant and connected to the community.” This approach offered students hands-on experience in various art forms while deepening their understanding of cultural heritage. By further connecting the school with the community, the program not only revitalized the arts curriculum but also fostered a stronger sense of connection and pride among students.

These place-based education initiatives exemplify the effective use of local resources and community knowledge to create educational experiences that are both relevant and impactful for students. Such activities embody the concepts of *métis* (place-knowing) and *bricolage* (place-thinking and place-doing), demonstrating how educational leaders understand and are aware of the temporal, cultural, and pedagogical needs of their students. By implementing practical and innovative solutions, these leaders enhance students’ education and strengthen their connection to the community.

Community Connection and Involvement

A recurring theme across the interviews was the importance of community connection. Community connection and involvement are central to the concept of *mētis*, or place-knowing. Leaders emphasized the value of intimately understanding the needs, values, and histories of their communities, which informs their decision-making and helps build robust relationships with students, parents, and local organizations. This intimate knowledge allows them to navigate and influence the socio-economic fabric of their communities effectively.

One principal emphasized their lifelong connection to the community and how it shapes their understanding and leadership. She stated, “I’ve lived in this community my entire life, so I know the families and the local culture very well. This connection helps me understand the needs of our students and how to best support them.” The principal’s deep-rooted knowledge of the community, including socio-cultural background and moral frames, helped them tailor educational practices to better support students and utilize local resources effectively. In the words of one middle school principal, “It’s just making connections, constantly making connections that can support your school.”

Ongoing engagement with community organizations showcases a comprehensive view of the local social fabric and leveraging it to benefit the school. A superintendent reflected on how their personal connection to the community influences their leadership and decision-making. She reflected on how this manifested for her during the COVID-19 pandemic, affirming,

The community’s support has been crucial in overcoming educational obstacles. During the pandemic, we had to find new ways to ensure students received their education and basic needs. The local businesses and community members stepped up, providing resources and assistance. This collaboration reinforced the importance of strong community ties and how our school can be a central hub for support and learning.

She saw her deep personal connection and understanding of the community as foundational to this willing involvement. Because she saw herself as “known by them” and she also knew them they shared a common sense of place—the school community. Together they could forge meaningful relationships and confront local challenges effectively, sharing the same concerns.

Likewise, a principal in the study discussed ways of leveraging community knowledge to support student needs during times of challenge and crisis.

We faced significant challenges during the winter storm [last year] when many families were without power and resources. Our school became a hub for distributing food and supplies, and we partnered with local businesses and community members to ensure everyone had what they needed. This experience reinforced the importance of our strong community ties and our role in supporting each other in times of crisis.

Responses such as this provide insights to the leaders’ intimate local knowledge and hint at how their place-based wisdom enabled them to devise creative solutions that addressed immediate challenges and also personally benefited students with certain needs.

The rural school leaders in this study consistently emphasized the interplay between community connection and their knowledge of place as central to their work. By recognizing and leveraging the unique social, cultural, and economic systems of their communities, these leaders were able to design educational experiences that were more relevant, supportive, and impactful for their students.

Fostering Students' Sense of Belonging

Data revealed that place-based education initiatives positively impact student engagement and perception of self. Place-conscious leaders view it as a moral responsibility to develop students' sense of *becoming* and *being* a part of the community, seeing education as a means of connecting students' lives to their locality. Place-conscious projects and initiatives have the potential to cultivate valuable skills and a deeper appreciation for heritage in students. Although responses focused on students, this acknowledgment revealed how leaders themselves sought out ways of fostering a strong sense of place as a shared reality and a site of mutual dialogue and experience. In that way, these responses reveal something about their own *place-becoming* and *place-being*, or sense of terroir.

One principal made a connection to how a place-based restoration endeavor had influenced students' connection to their community: "When students see how their education connects to their community and its history it makes their learning more meaningful." Therefore, students' involvement in renovation projects, revitalization activities, and engagement with local history enhance their sense of community and foster feelings of belonging.

One of the rural principals shared how place-based ideas can reinforce student engagement through socio-ecological justice. He characterized it this way: "Hands-on projects not only teach them valuable ecological skills but also instill a sense of responsibility towards their local environment. Students become more engaged and motivated when they see the tangible impact of their efforts on their community and [fellow] citizens." Similar to the previous theme, environmental stewardship programs were viewed as extremely impactful. Students participated in activities like tree planting and river clean-ups. Rurally responsive leaders sought ways to integrate these activities relating to conservation and sustainability into the curriculum and campus culture.

Rural school leaders viewed environmental projects as a means to help students develop a deeper connection to their local selves, enhancing their sense of responsibility and engagement. As one superintendent reflected, place-based education projects influenced students' perceptions of both community and self:

Students start to see the value in their community and develop a sense of pride and responsibility through place-based education projects. For instance, our local agriculture curriculum has students working with local farmers, learning about sustainable farming practices. This hands-on experience connects their education to the community's economic activities, making their learning more relevant and engaging.

This quote underscores how forming a link between education and local economic activities can help students recognize the relevance of their learning and fosters belonging and an awareness of place in their community.

One principal shared how rurally responsive projects impact students' engagement and perception: We incorporated local cultural traditions into our arts program by inviting community artists to work with students on various projects. These activities not only teach students about their cultural heritage but also give them hands-on experience in different art forms. It's been incredibly beneficial in making the arts program more vibrant and connected to the community. Students develop a deeper appreciation for their heritage and are more engaged in their learning.

Integrating local cultural traditions and community members into the curriculum enhanced student appreciation in students for their heritage and increases their engagement in learning. Such place-based initiatives positively impact student engagement and self-perception.

Connecting education to the local community as a practiced space and mobilizing local place-based assets, capital, and resources, students develop a civic sense of self, seeing the relevance of their education to their own lives and situations. Leaders saw creating spaces for these projects as integral given the way these experiences help students gain valuable skills and a deeper appreciation for their heritage.

Local Challenges and Support Systems

Despite the positive outcomes, leaders acknowledged several challenges in implementing place-based initiatives, often requiring significant innovation and improvisation. These challenges included identifying and mobilizing assets, securing capital and resources, aligning projects with educational standards, and gaining buy-in from diverse community stakeholders. Nevertheless, the strong community support and clear benefits for students made these efforts worthwhile. Rural school leaders frequently drew on their understanding of *place-thinking* and *place-doing* to navigate and overcome these obstacles, making do with assets and resources at hand (i.e., bricolage).

One secondary principal in the study discussed the need to secure resources for place-based projects, even when difficult. He stated,

One of the biggest challenges we face is finding the necessary resources to support our place-based initiatives. Funding is always tight, and we have to be very creative in how we allocate our budget. We've managed to get some grants and community donations, but it's a constant struggle to ensure we have what we need to make these projects successful. But we can't afford not to.

This principal's account illustrates how knowledge of place enabled him to creatively mobilize funding and by leveraging external community support. In this manner, he was able to ensure the sustainability and success of student initiatives, which he viewed as an imperative.

According to a fellow principal, they faced a real challenge in harmonizing place-based projects with educational standards and mandated curriculum. They shared,

Aligning our place-based projects with state educational standards can be tricky. We have to ensure that our initiatives not only engage students and connect them to the community but also meet the required learning outcomes. This requires a lot of planning and collaboration with teachers to integrate these projects into the curriculum effectively.

There was a noted complexity to ensuring that place-conscious and community-based education initiatives meet educational standards while remaining engaging and relevant.

However, this also was exhibited through the leaders' perception of community resistance. As one Appalachian superintendent reflected,

Getting buy-in from all stakeholders [for place-conscious education], especially those who are resistant to change, is a major challenge. Some parents and community members are skeptical about the value of place-based education and prefer more traditional approaches. We've had to work hard to demonstrate the benefits of these initiatives and show how they positively impact student learning and community engagement.

Resistance in rural and socially conservative regions emerged as a significant obstacle. As one superintendent explained, overcoming such hurdles requires a collective effort grounded in effective communication and advocacy to secure support from all stakeholders. Leaders had to know how to take a rurally responsive approach to communicating in terms of the local values and worldviews. This helped to translate the educational benefits of place-conscious educational endeavors.

Conversely, another rural school leader shared how an unwavering community support had been crucial in overcoming locally based challenges. She maintained,

Community support has been absolutely vital in overcoming challenges we face. During a particularly tough financial year, local businesses and community members stepped up to provide funding and resources for our place-based projects. Their support has been instrumental in making these initiatives possible. And successful. Knowing that the community believes in what we're doing gives us the motivation to keep pushing forward despite the obstacles.

Regardless of support or resistance, cultivating community support was a major work of bricolage for these leaders. The rural leaders' ability to navigate these challenges within their local contexts and with the knowledge of stakeholders exemplified their *place-thinking* and *place-doing*.

Overcoming perceived resource limitations and ensuring the success of place-conscious initiatives meant constantly reframing their thinking about available assets and community resources. To implement place-based education initiatives, such as securing resources, aligning projects with standards, and gaining stakeholder buy-in required rethinking and reimagining their respective situation in each rural place. These challenges aside, the general strong support from the community for teaching and learning (though sometimes expected to be traditional) and the perceived benefits for students made their efforts to re-envision learning worthwhile.

Leadership Praxis as Partnership Building

The pragmatic work of school leadership bricolage is evident both explicitly and implicitly in their discussions of place. Rural educational leaders identify as individuals who naturally seek out assets and capital from the local environment to make do, to get by, and to apply to necessary ways—and often in ways beyond the purpose or outside of the normal use of the resource.

Educational leaders described extensive backgrounds in education, transitioning from teaching to administrative roles. This experience equips them for the content- and context-laden aspects of rural education, which are often deeply rooted in the geographic and historical context of their communities. Their career trajectories are deeply influenced by their professional training and leadership styles. Leaders often spoke of making do with available resources and using their skills to navigate the unique challenges of rural education.

A strong personal connection to the place where they work and interact with others had an impact on their awareness of assets and capital. This connection also provided them with a basis for being creative or innovative when needed. This became particularly apparent when participants reflected on decision-making and problem-solving during the COVID-19 pandemic.

One superintendent viewed her response to COVID-19 as a “blessing in disguise.” The improvisations and initiatives prompted by the pandemic served as a catalyst for further positive and meaningful change. Consequently, she worked to sustain these programs, recognizing their effectiveness long after the immediate concerns of school closures and masking had passed.

COVID-19 was a significant challenge, but in some ways, it was a blessing in disguise. We had to improvise and find new ways to engage students and support their learning remotely. This led to some innovative solutions that we have continued to use even after returning to in-person learning. For example, we developed virtual learning modules and online resources that have enhanced our educational offerings. These tools have been so effective that we plan to keep using them long after the pandemic is over.

Similarly, another superintendent reflected on the improvisational approaches taken during the pandemic and the continued impact of these changes,

During the pandemic, we had to think on our feet and come up with solutions that were both immediate and long-lasting. One thing we did was set up outdoor classrooms to ensure students could continue learning in a safer environment. This was not only a temporary fix but also an idea that we realized could benefit our students in the long term, promoting more outdoor and experiential learning opportunities. These outdoor spaces have become a permanent part of our school setup.

Leadership ability to innovate and create lasting solutions out of necessity embodies the concept of bricolage. School leaders in rural places often use the constraints and challenges of the critical events like the pandemic or moments of conflict as opportunities to develop new educational endeavors and implementing strategies that they viewed as innovative. In doing so they demonstrate the notion that

bricolage as a praxis of making do with available resources at hand and improvising solutions from what is “within reach.”

Participants in this study framed their ability to engage in their work in rural schools in the idea of a bricolage of place. One way in which this was expressed was through the development of local partnerships. Often times in rural places large community or business partners are a limited resource. As one high school principal discussed, this same type of work was critical to building community connections and partnerships. In his words,

I spend a lot of time trying to get involved with the community. Any group that is within reach, we will bring in as a community partner. One year, it was the local newspaper. We recognized them for all their coverage of the athletics and academic success of our students. We have different companies that would come in to say, “Hey, we’re here to support you.” The energy company came to say, “We have a grant here for you for your math and science.” We really appreciate this partnership.

This participant’s response reveals how the leader leveraged community partnerships to supplement relevant resources for the school and support for students, using the existing social capital creatively to address needs and enhance the educational experience.

Overall, these data illustrate the nature of educational leadership in rural settings as that of a bricoleur, where leaders navigate situations with ingenuity and resourcefulness. While these innovations and improvisations may seem modest compared to those in well-resourced districts, they reflect a determined effort to succeed despite obstacles. By leveraging deep community connections to enhance their schools’ resources and capacities, these leaders embody what Lévi-Strauss described as *patchworking*—a hallmark of bricolage—within the context of place.

Discussion

The discoveries from this study highlight the multifaceted role of place in rural educational leadership. My analysis attempts to align the data with the emerging framework of Active Aspects of Place as Practiced Space. This tripartite framework of *métis*, *terroir*, and bricolage provided a lens to focus on the dynamic interplay between place and educational leadership practices, emphasizing the importance of leader perception and place-consciousness in shaping educational aims.

Interpretative Synthesis of Discoveries

The integration of the Active Aspects of Place within rural educational leadership suggests that practitioners do not merely occupy a geographic location but rather inhabit a practiced space that requires a sophisticated synthesis of local intelligence and improvisational action (Cresswell, 1996; Tuan, 1977). Integrating the conceptual lenses of bricolage, *métis*, and *terroir* into the empirical data provides a flexible

and nuanced lens for understanding how leaders transform the perceived deficits of rurality into administrative assets.

To that point, the data illustrate how the constraints of the rural environment necessitate a leadership style defined by bricolage, or the creative repurposing of existing materials and available assets to solve complex problems (Lévi-Strauss, 1966). The data regarding administrative responses to the pandemic and resource scarcity highlight the leader as a bricoleur who navigates uncertainty by patchworking solutions from whatever resources are within reach (Baker & Nelson, 2005; Jenlink, 2006). Rather than viewing a lack of formal capital as a permanent barrier, these leaders treated available local means as assets to be leveraged for student benefit (Young & Eddy-Spicer, 2019). This pragmatic innovation demonstrates that rural responsiveness is an active, place-based way of thinking and doing that fosters a unique synthesis of interconnected elements within the educational environment (Eddy-Spicer et al., 2021; Zollo et al., 2018).

The evidence from the qualitative data regarding the implementation of place-based education projects further clarifies the role of *mētis* as a form of local knowledge indigenous to place and gained from an intimate understanding of the context and problem (Scott, 1998). Participants utilized this practical intelligence to navigate the socio-economic fabric of their communities, effectively reading and decoding local situations to build support for school initiatives (Azano, 2011). This place-knowing is not a static intellectual exercise, but a practiced responsiveness born of experience that enables leaders to bridge universal educational principles with specific community needs (Sipman et al., 2019). The study findings suggest that this local knowledge is a primary mechanism through which leaders overcome the disconnect between macro-policy decisions and the grounded realities of rural education (Biddle & Azano, 2016; Johnson & Howley, 2015).

Finally, this study reveals how the lived experiences of rural school leaders engaging in place-based leadership can be theorized as an act of terroir in resource-limited or remote environments (Howley & Howley, 2014). When leaders described their professional identities as deeply integrated with community history and environment, they were articulating a sense of terroir, which functions as the socio-cultural background and professional wisdom shaped by a connection to place over time (Howley & Howley, 2014; Pellechia, 2018). This is inherent in educational leadership as an art, a shared reality, and a conversation within the communities they live and lead. At times, that may even mean for them that terroir is an act of transgression when the educational needs of students push leaders to act both within and beyond the localized and sometimes limiting norms of the community. This framing then allows leadership praxis to be seen as both a reflective practice and an active way of thinking. This reflective action and active thinking take place within a practiced space where decisions are not based on standardized, external protocols but on the unique flavor of the local context (Meloni & Swinnen, 2018).

Conclusion

This inquiry examines the role of place in shaping rural educational leadership. Primarily, my aim was simply to explore ways that rural educational leaders identify and engage with the concept of place and how they consider its influence on their decision-making, problem-solving, and resource leveraging. By aligning discoveries from these data with the Active Aspects of Place as Practiced Space, I hope to clarify how place-consciousness—place-knowing, place-thinking/doing, and place-being—can be integral to responsive leadership in rural education. Future researchers may wish to delve deeper into these dimensions to further examine the intricate relationship between place and educational leadership in rural places.

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About the Author

Charles Lowery, Ed.D., is an Associate Professor of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies in the School of Education at Virginia Tech. His research interests focus on the impact of crisis, conflict, and controversy on educational decision-making for school leaders, particularly in rural, remote, and resource-limited regions. He has also published extensively on the moral dimensions of democratic leadership and the impact of the opioid crisis on schools and students.

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