Supporting Rural Adolescent Voices in the Secondary English Language Arts Classroom

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this qualitative study was to employ a sociocultural, anti-deficit, and dialogic rural theoretical framework to examine the ways teachers seek to support the lived experiences of rural adolescent students in the secondary English language arts classroom as students make meaning with the content of the curriculum. This study worked with the social constructs of rurality (Azano, 2011; Azano & Biddle, 2019; Corbett, 2007; Gruenewald, 2008), critical literacy (Freire, 1990, 2018; Gee, 1990), and learning-centered pedagogy (Fecho et al., 2021) to develop insights into ways that teachers navigate opportunities and challenges in contemporary rural schools. The study focused on secondary English language arts teachers teaching in rural school districts. The participant selection criteria included being employed fulltime as an English language arts teacher at a secondary rural high school, having taught for at least three years, and identifying as teaching from a learning-centered pedagogical stance. All three participants taught at rural North Carolina high schools. The method used was adapted from the three-phase interview approach (Seidman, 1990), with an intake interview, a midpoint interview, and a final interview. The midpoint interview was adapted to consist of three separate post-classroom observation interviews. The post-classroom observation interviews were preceded each round by a co-planning lesson and a classroom observation. There were three stages of data generation, spanning from February 2021 to May 2021. To learn about participants' experiences supporting rural student voices, triangulation (Guba & Lincoln, 1981) was used through multiple data sources: teacher

interviews, collaborative lesson planning, classroom observations, post-observation conferences, field notes, memos, and email correspondences. Thematic analysis (Maxwell, 2013) was used to analyze and code the data. From the data analysis, three understandings were generated about the ways in which rural English language arts teachers support students in the classroom. Participants were (1) supporting student voice through instructional design, (2) attending to biases and seeking to dialogue within the classroom, and (3) utilizing lived experiences and literacies. The implications of the study include that rural students can face stereotypes due to the deficit mindset of rurality (Azano et al., 2021a, 2021b, Azano & Biddle, 2019; Theobald & Wood, 2010) and that the utilization of bringing their lived experiences into the classroom can serve as a means to help them make meaning with the content of the classroom. The English language arts classroom can be a space for students to be supported through the use of a learning-centered stance that seeks to collapse traditional hierarchies in the classroom (Fecho et al., 2021).

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GENERAL AUDIENCE ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to use a sociocultural, anti-deficit, and dialogic rural theoretical framework to examine ways teachers can draw on the lived experiences of rural adolescent students in secondary English language arts classrooms as students make meaning with curriculum content. This study worked with the social constructs of rurality (Azano, 2011; Azano & Biddle, 2019; Corbett, 2007; Gruenewald, 2008), critical literacy (Freire, 1990, 2018; Gee, 1990), and learning-centered pedagogy (Fecho et al., 2021) to develop insights into ways that teachers navigate opportunities and challenges in contemporary rural schools. Participant criteria included being employed fulltime as an English language arts teacher at a rural secondary school, having taught for at least three years, and The study's three participants were rural North Carolina secondary English language arts teachers. Utilizing an adapted three-phase interview process, the study had three stages for each participant: (1) an intake interview, (2) three rounds per participant of co-planning, classroom observations, and post-observation conferences, and (3) a final interview. Thematic analysis (Maxwell, 2013) was used to analyze and code the data. Understandings were that participants, in their success and challenges of supporting rural student voices (1) supported student voice through instructional design, (2) attended to biases and seeking to dialogue within the classroom, and (3) utilized the lived experiences and literacies.

Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my former students at PCEC. If there is anything good about me, it has been because of you. Thank you for doing life with me, for sharing your stories, and forgiving me the time I accidently took you to the wrong play. Being able to see you grow into fearless, intelligent, and loving humans has been the greatest joy of my life.

I love you so.

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To Kerri, Catherine, and Caroline – thank you for sharing your stories. I could not have done this without you.

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Introduction

"Heather, you really need to watch the way you speak. Talk lower. Talk slower. No one will take you seriously when you go to college." Those words, told to me by a well-meaning teacher, have stayed with me. They wanted me to be prepared for college, wanted me to have a good shot at whatever career path I decided to pursue. My literal voice was perceived to possibly stand in the way of my future endeavors. My voice was soft in volume, high-pitched in tone, and often punctuated with a twang indicative of my North Carolina hometown. Even my family commented on my accent as being more pronounced than theirs: my twin sister whose voice never gave the hint of a Carolina twang, my mother who was raised in Georgia but was far more influenced by my Massachusetts-raised grandmother, and my father who spent his formative years on the Gulf Coasts of Alabama and Texas but whose background could only be heard in the form of an occasional "fixin' to go" when in a hurry. I was frequently told, "You sound like a local, Heather Lynn."

I *was* a local; I spent all but a year of my life in my hometown. I was a product of my place even if my family did not always feel aligned with our place. My accent was indicative of place, but so were other aspects of my auditory voice, like my soft spoken tone. Being raised in a Southern Baptist household, the construct that girls behaved a certain way was instilled in me, even if that way was never verbally articulated. There was a balance to how one acted as a young lady: be sweet but never flirty, be pretty but never showy, be smart but never clever, be polite but never talkative. Such norms give voice to the complexities of my hometown and place, particularly with my experience of rurality as an adolescent. There were affordances of my rural place, but there were also

constraints. However, I want to clearly articulate that as a cisgender white female from a middle-class family, the complexities of place that I experienced growing-up did not carry the same weight nor produce the potential ramifications as those of other socioeconomic statues, races, religions, and gender identities. My rural experience was one of privilege.

In keeping with the "hopes" of life in rural areas, like building a home (Sherman, 2009) and safe schools (Malkus, 2018), my parents found just that – lower prices for several acres of rural land where they built their home and smaller class sizes for me and my sister. Being rural, specifically southern rural, was a source of pride. There were many aspects of my hometown and youth that were characteristic of a seemingly picturesque rural upbringing: Friday nights spent watching the multi-year state champions football team, full church pews each Sunday, the students in the school cafeteria singing along when a good country song came on the radio, using Carhartt jackets instead of letterman jackets, and my sister marrying her high school sweetheart. All things that signify key elements of small-town rural culture that are important to many of those who live in these rural areas, things that should be celebrated instead of denigrated by negative stereotypes about this cultural context. However, there are elements of any cultural context that, when one digs deeply into them and looks at them with a critical eye, show the complicated nature of culture and lived experience.

It can be highly problematic to view any cultural context with an idyllic or uncritical eye. Inside of every culture, things are complex and there is nuance beneath the surface that can be worrisome. These nuances can teach us about culture and the importance of both respecting and troubling aspects of culture (Fecho, 2011; Gee, 1990),

as well as how elements of rural culture are viewed and portrayed by insiders and outsiders (Corbett, 2007). There were aspects of my hometown that spoke to the complexities of Southern rurality and the ways in which symbols and cultural norms can have wildly different meanings and messages for different people; for example: Confederate flags printed on shirts, hanging off front porches, and displayed on bumpers, the car horns that played "I Wish I Was in Dixie" as they were driven off the school lot each day, the whispered stories of overdose tragedies that were never explicitly named, the mills that shut down in the early 2000s, and the subsequent flood of unemployment across the county. It is imperative that I acknowledge that the symbol of the Confederate flag, along with all things associated with the construct of Dixie, are not symbols of nostalgia, but emblematic of an historic and contemporary racially-based disenfranchisement that exists in many rural communities (Dahill-Brown & Jochim, 2018). Just as my family accepted some aspects of rurality as part of their identity but rejected others, I saw some images of rurality in my community that were uplifted, ignored or dismissed as not being valuable, and some images and aspects of culture that are complex because they can signify positive nostalgia for some and hate and violence for others. It is important to look at the implications of aspects of cultural life to better understand those issues and how they can lead to negative portrayals of a region or willful ignorance about troubling aspects of that region.

Growing up in a southern rural community, my place felt like a double-edged sword, though I did not have the vocabulary to articulate such a dynamic at the time. I remember being in high school and my classmates would joke about one's "country level": you were either not southern, southern, country, country club southern, a redneck,

or a hick. There were layers of criteria to the categories and stages within each one, dictated by where you were from the county, your accent, and your habits. You might be southern, but how southern were you? Sweet tea southern or livermush southern? It was like a continuum. Rather than being a simple dichotomy, the continuum spoke to a larger more prevalent narrative: you could be *too country*. According to the "educated" class, being too country was the line where being rural crossed over from being an asset to being a liability. It was a balance of the affordances of rurality and the restraints of rurality. The affordances of rurality could serve as capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 2001; Sherman, 2017), such as in the form of trustworthiness or being seen as "a good ol' boy"; the restraints of rurality often manifested themselves in the form of rural stereotypes, such as a lack of worldliness or being perceived as backwards. What further complicated the dual nature of rurality was in who controlled the rural narrative. Who controlled the narrative – or who set the stereotypes – when it came to how country you need to be in order to have capital or at what point being country impacted your viable resources? Who established or maintained the stereotypes of rural people that further served to predicate the rural narrative?

Regardless of whether or not my family or teacher meant to articulate it as such, I adopted the narrative that my auditory voice was a liability. The idea that somehow there was something "wrong" with my voice was reinforced when my college roommate giggled at the twang that would arise in the form of particularly long vowels when I was animated in conversation. I had a studio art minor in my undergraduate program and nothing evoked uninvited laughter from my peers more than when I spoke about my *drawlin'* courses. I wanted to be taken seriously and I knew I wanted a career in

education. I was, in fact, *too rural*, and it seemed my voice was a liability. Throughout my time in undergraduate school, into my beginning teacher years, and as I began graduate school courses, I watched the way I spoke. Soon it was a mantra in my head on repeat: "Talk lower. Talk slower. Do not sound Southern. Do not sound country. Do not sound rural." I did not yet know about "code switching," yet I knew in what situations I had to switch my speech and knew I was treated differently when I did. Flash forward to my sixth year teaching in a rural community. "Betty" always spoke with great passion and energy, always peppered with *ain'ts* and colloquialisms. One day Betty was telling me a story before my American literature class. After several uses of *ain't* in the tale, I corrected her: "I *am not*." As soon as the words tumbled out of my mouth, I realized what I had done. Just as my well-meaning teacher did over a decade before, I had corrected a student's voice. I tried to make her less rural.

A deficit view of rurality can negatively impact those in rural places, especially rural students who are developing their sense of identity. Among the multiple facets at work in the production of one's identity, for those from rural areas, rurality is part of the equation (Theobald & Wood, 2010). That identity and its formation are attached to being rural. Identity formation is in turn influenced by the dominant cultural narratives which define what rurality means, each of which impacts "agency" and "self-efficacy" (p. 18). For some, being rural means having strong and consistent community (Brandau & Collins, 1994; Corbett, 2007). For others, being rural is attached to a deficit view of being less or without, as in having a lack of ("worldly") culture or less potential (McShane & Smarick, 2018).

Because of the connection to identity, the dominant cultural narratives of rurality influence rural narratives and, consequently, the narratives of rural students. As they seek to support students, it is crucial for teachers to bear in mind the importance of students' understanding of their own rural identities, whether they perceive rurality in positive or negative ways. That is, if teachers want to make curriculum connections that matter to their students, teachers must consider the lived experiences of their students. For many in rural spaces, rurality is an asset. Betty taught me that when I was supposed to be teaching her about American literature. Betty was proud of being rural. She viewed herself, as I did when I was her age, as being a product of her place.

After our exchange, I profusely apologized to Betty and I made it a point to never again "correct" a student's place-based language. However, the shame that rightfully accompanied my actions stayed with me. It was not the same shame of sounding country that I had felt as a teenager and as a young adult. The shame I felt was instead the shame of someone who had challenged part of their identity. Unwittingly, I carried with me a personal deficit mindset of rurality. It was a deficit mindset that was woven over the years, made of many voices, including my own. It was the words of the well-meaning teacher advising me to watch my accent, my family wondering when I became "local" in my speech, and my college peers, giggling at my twang.

The voices weaving this mindset were not limited to family, teachers, and peers, however; they were broader than my immediate circle. It was also the words from the onslaught of television shows (Theobald, 1997) whose laughs came at the expense of rurality, the news anchors bemoaning the status of rural people and rural places, and the political pundits who portrayed all that was rural was a voting group too behind to bother

attempting to sway. Over the years, my construct of being rural became attached to not being good enough, of being less than. Somewhere along the way, the restraints of rurality outweighed the affordances of rurality in my memory. As a rural educator, I knew I had to intentionally restructure my mindset, focusing on supporting rural students by utilizing the challenges and potentiality of rurality. In order to support rural students, I needed to reclaim my rural identity and voice.

Rationale and Significance

Rural teachers and rural students are often negatively affected by the deficit mindset associated with rurality (Azano & Biddle, 2019; Theobald & Wood, 2010). The deficit mindset associated with rurality is based upon stereotypes and misconceptions not only prominent in contemporary culture but those that are historically rooted as well. The dominant narrative of rurality is one of being "without"; that is, being limited in resources and opportunities. Influencing perceptions of rural places, institutions, and people, this deficit mindset diminishes rural communities and the lived experiences of rural people. There is a need to move from a narrative of loss (i.e., a focus on the constraints of rurality) to a narrative of hope in rural places (i.e., a focus on the affordances of rurality) (Azano & Biddle, 2019). Because schools retain an important role within the rural community, they can be a space in which the narrative of rurality is changed. By examining the ways in which rural teachers seek to support voices of rural adolescent students within the English language arts classroom, the lived experiences of students are articulated, heard, and valued. There is much researchers can learn about teacher practice in rural contexts when they examine teachers' efforts to enact a learning-centered pedagogy (Fecho, et al., 2021), which brings students' lived experiences into dialogue with curriculum (Stewart, et al., 2019).

Purpose Statement

This project sought to understand how teachers' perceptions of rurality, characteristics of rural contexts, and the lived experiences of students might function as both sources of tension and avenues for success and engagement in the secondary English language arts classroom. Set in rural high schools, this study focused on the ways in which the rural setting shapes learning-centered pedagogical practices; conceptions and misconceptions of rural schools, teachers, and communities; and ways in which teachers support student voice towards meaning-making in the secondary English language arts classroom.

Research Questions

With the aim of building and understanding of how rurality influences teacher and student interactions in the secondary English language arts classroom, I used the following research questions to guide my exploration.

1. What does it look like when teachers design and implement instruction focused on making student voice a key driver in meaning-making in rural English classrooms?
2. What challenges do teachers encounter in rural contexts when seeking to work from learning-centered (Fecho, et al., 2021) pedagogical stances? How do they respond to those challenges?
3. How do teachers in rural schools learn about and incorporate the cultures of their students as tools for making meaning from texts?

Theoretical Framework

In order to support rural students, teachers must navigate the potential challenges and opportunities of rurality as they seek to help students make meaning with their lived experiences. The purpose of this chapter is to articulate a greater sociocultural umbrella

that utilizes an anti-deficit and dialogic rural theoretical framework. This study worked with the social constructs of rurality (Azano, 2011; Azano & Biddle, 2019; Corbett, 2007; Gruenewald, 2008), critical literacy (Freire, 1990, 2018; Gee, 1990), and learning-centered pedagogy (Fecho et al., 2021) to develop insights into ways that teachers navigate opportunities and challenges in contemporary rural schools. My framework was focused on the construct of learning-centered pedagogy (Fecho, et al., 2021) to support inquiry into ways contemporary schooling affords and constrains teachers' efforts to draw on rural adolescent students' experiences as they make meaning from texts in the secondary English language arts classroom.

The Construct of Rurality and the Reality of Rural Schools

As part of my efforts to explore the realities encountered by those living, learning, and teaching in rural spaces, I must first describe and unpack key concepts that undergird the social construct of rurality, which often reinforces a deficit mindset of rurality. This means there is a need to look at not just rurality in the United States as a broader topic that is influenced by deficit thinking, but also specifically characteristics of rural schools in the United States.

Rural schools are a large part of the education system of the United States, comprising approximately 50% of U.S. schools. Rural communities span across the nation, from Appalachia to the Pacific Northwest (Jimerson, 2005). The construct of rurality shapes the work of teachers and the lived experiences of students in their classrooms. Rurality, regardless of whether or not it is viewed as positive, negative, or neutral, plays into student and teacher identity, unless they are not from rural places (Theobald & Wood, 2010). Although the lived experiences of those in rural locales may

not align with the dominant cultural narratives, those dominant narratives are still influential on both people living in rural areas and people from the outside perceiving rural areas. Teachers seeking to support the voices of rural students should consider the dominant cultural narratives of rurality, as well as the influence of a deficit mindset of rurality on students.

Defining Rural

In order to understand why the concept of rurality is influential when thinking about the lived experiences of teachers and students in rural areas, it is necessary to define what "rural" means. When looking at the construct of rural, it is crucial to remember that rural looks different across the country and, while definitions of rural may differ slightly, rural is primarily about place. Based on metro-centric thinking and urbanized politics, rural is often defined as "what is not urban." Once urban is determined, what remains is rural (Ratcliffe et al., 2016, p. 1).

Characteristics of Rural

Rural spaces are often viewed as being resistant geographies that stave off advancement and modernity (Corbett, 2006; Corbett, 2014; Corbett & Helmer, 2016) through rural and place are now being viewed as more fluid and changing (Azano et al., 2021b; Corbett, 2020). Rural areas are typically located away from urban centers and are thinly populated, comprising 97% of the country's land (United States Census Bureau). Twelve categories are used by the National Center for Education Statistics to classify schools by coordinates and locale; subtypes of the categories are identified by distance from urban centers (National Center for Education Statistics). A critical eye is needed because of the "urban centric" nature of the latest classification system, which looks at

the locale-specific divisions of city, suburban, town, and rural. This classification system is another means in which rurality is compared to urbanity and vice versa. In each of the four divisions, there are three subcategories: fringe, distant, and remote. These subcategories matter when critically examining rurality because each category is defined by the rural area's physical distance from an urban area. I do not mean for this interpretation of the categories to be a negative perspective of what is urban, but rather, that any comparison which "others" its subjects, is problematic. The subcategories of rural further the notion of othering, as each identification and definition has a subtle implication of being away from what is mainstream. Rural communities are complex and different; we must broaden our definition of rural if we are to understand rural spaces (Azano et al., 2021b). If fact, place, including rural places, is fluid (Corbett, 2020). If we are truly concerned with a deficit mindset of rurality and the ways it impacts teachers and students, even the categories and definitions of rurality should be critiqued.

The Rural Life Problem and the Rural School Problem

Defining rurality matters when thinking about the lived experiences of rural teachers and students because context informs their positionality. In order to understand the lived experiences of those persons in rural places, one must understand rurality in terms of the history of rural schools.

The Rural School Problem

Rural schools, being located in typically low-density areas (Beeson & Strange, 2003; Biddle & Azano, 2016; Stern, 1994), have the dual responsibility of not only being one of few social institutions in the area but often functioning also as the largest employer in the area (Biddle & Azano, 2016). In this dual responsibility, rural schools are

a pivotal part of rural communities. Because rural schools, even in modernity, are a key fixture in rural communities, there should be an examination as to how the status of schools in rural locales has changed. The unique status of rural schools is not new, although the status of rural schools has not always been a positive one from a globalized perspective. *The rural school problem* is a remaining facet of what Cubberley (1914) viewed as the greater *rural life problem* (Corbett & Helmer, 2016). Following the industrial revolution, societal and economic changes occurred so quickly that rural areas were unable to keep up with the changing needs of society (Cubberley, 1914; Schafft & Youngblood Jackson, 2010).

The Rural Life Problem

Cubberley (1914) described the *rural life problem* as being concerned about aspects and institutions of rural life, such as land ownership and farming tenets, organized religion, domestic life, and education. The view of the mid to late nineteenth-century school reformers was that *the rural life problem* could be solved through restructuring schools. According to the school reformers, rural schools should follow a formulaic model to streamline schools: schools should be administration-centered, teachers should be professionals, and schools consolidated (Corbett & Helmer, 2016). The argument reformers made was one of efficiency, stressing the need for all students to be able to compete in a globalized society (Schafft & Youngblood Jackson, 2010). This sentiment sounds very similar to that of the student who spoke of the lack of preparation and resources for rural students directly impacting their performance post-graduation.

The mid to late nineteenth-century reformers' articulation of *the rural life problem* and *the rural school problem* defines aspects of rurality by deeming them less

than and problematic (Biddle & Azano, 2016). Even the articulation of the dynamic as a problem sets up the notion that rurality is in fact an issue. The dominant narrative implies that in order to be successful, rural schools must be like urban schools and rural students must be able to compete with urban students. However, the problematic nature of *the rural school problem* is not limited to the mid to late nineteenth century (Cubberley, 1914; Schafft, 2010).

The Rural School Problem in the Twenty-First Century

As I saw during my time teaching in a rural public school, the rural school problem (Cubberely, 1914) exists in unexpected ways in the twenty-first century (Schafft, 2010), impacting expectations and opportunities for rural students when compared to their non-rural peers.

The Perceived Tension Between Rural Schools and Modernity

The concept of *the rural school problem* is not entirely absent in the twenty-first century; the rural school problem exists because of tensions between education officials and rural citizens over school modernization (Corbett & Helmer, 2016). Just as rural communities experienced changes at the turn of the twentieth century due to outside movements, going into the twenty-first century, there have been multiple factors contributing to "radically" altering rural communities, such as the economic impact of free trade, the prevalence of media, and school reform initiatives that utilize standardized curriculum (Schafft & Youngblood Jackson, 2010, p. 2).

Rurality and Critical Consciousness

Seeing the Possible: An Example in a Rural Public School

Rural teachers often "wear many hats" from leading sports teams and advising, to

collaborating on developed projects (Melton, 2020). During my time teaching at a rural public school, I would be lying if I said I did not see challenges that existed due to school size and funding, such as the fact that my first year teaching I was paid a part-time salary because the school could not afford a full-time English teacher but needed a full-time English teacher. I saw the work that teachers and administrators did in order to lower costs for school activities, like working all year fundraising through candy and snack sales to make prom and graduation activities affordable for students. But more than the perceived challenges of rural education or the challenges I saw arise in my experiences, I think about the unique opportunities that were afforded by teaching in a rural community. For instance, my small class sizes, never exceeding 22 students, were instrumental in allowing for project-centered approaches in the English curriculum, as was the case with the required senior project, which I altered to include a requirement that students include some form of community service in their mentoring hours or in their final product. Having a small class allowed the time and ability to assist students in finding a need within the community, brainstorming ways that they could assist with said need, and enacting a student-led plan.

As part of this project, students sought out spaces of need and utilized community resources. I had a student who collected enough storybooks to provide every elementary student in the county with a new book. After taking training courses in phlebotomy, another student organized a county-wide blood drive, and yet another student began a dress drive that provided prom dresses free of charge to students, a project which not only spanned across five counties but that also continues four years later. Despite the limited resources as compared to other counties (Azano & Stewart, 2015; Malkus, 2018), my

students were able to use their community connections and individual skill sets and interests in order to give back to their communities in ways that made them feel immensely proud. Seeing the change they could make in their community, with the help of their community, was empowering for students, and it reminded them—and me—that our rural community was a place of opportunity and growth.

Fear of Freedom and the Danger of Conscientização

The question becomes, how do I, as a rural teacher and researcher concerned with supporting rural teachers and students, reframe my thinking in order to avoid a deficit mindset of rurality? I believe that the answer is a shift to the possibility of rurality, which comes from the work of Freire (2018) and how his worked was later utilized by Azano and Biddle (2019) to fit within rural spaces.

Danger of conscientização stands for "the idea of becoming aware of social, political, and economic inequities and taking action against these oppressive systems of reality – in essence the act of becoming critical" (Azano & Biddle, 2019, pp. 4-5). With *fear of freedom*, the possessor may not be aware of said *fear of freedom* and it "makes him see ghosts." (Freire, 2018, p. 36). Azano and Biddle explained that the traditional means of studying rurality is a deficit-minded theoretical lens. This is an important idea to parse because the deficit mindset of rurality can limit what is perceived to be possible in rural places and by those in rural communities. Thus, Azano and Biddle looked to Freire's theories of critical awareness and oppression in order to "frame and reframe rural challenges and opportunities" (p. 4). In reframing and re-conceptualizing the role of critical literacy in the rural classroom, Freire's (2018) *danger of conscientização* and *fear of freedom* (pp. 36-36) are of great importance because both concepts are rooted in the

experience of the student as they make meaning with the world. In the place of the classroom, with the framework of *danger of conscientização* and *fear of freedom*, rural teachers and rural students can critically think about and engage with the content of their community.

The *fear of freedom* can play out in the rural context in the form of losing industries and resources (Azano & Biddle, 2019; Donehower et al., 2007), such as the coal industry in Appalachia or the forestry industry in Maine (Azano & Biddle, 2019). These industries are defining aspects of regional rural cultures with economic importance, but said industries also have potential consequences in terms of the environmental and social impacts on the community. What happens when those defining industries change or are absent from the landscape of the community? Azano and Biddle articulated that the departure or minimization of an industry in a rural area serves as a ghost, a feature that once defined a rural area, and there is a fear attached to that ghost and that narrative of loss.

Rural areas are often defined by their losses (Azano & Biddle, 2019; Corbett, 2007; Schafft et al., 2010) and can be haunted by the ghosts that arise from the *fear of freedom* (Azano & Biddle, 2019; Freire, 2018). I think about the textile mills that were once one of the largest industries in North Carolina, including in the foothills where I am from. By the time I was in high school, the mill villages that once housed mill workers and their families were long since abandoned, and the mills closed left and right, with devastating consequences to the community. I remember the incredible sense of fear that came with the mass loss of jobs across the county. It was not just the loss of an industry. It was the loss of a way of life. However, to view the state of the mill industry with only a

negative mindset or as defining the whole community would potentially negate the spaces of promise and possibility in the community. In the county adjacent to mine, the mill villages have been given new life. Renovated into affordable family homes, the mill villages are once again the center of the community. Rather than housing the ghosts of a former time, the mill villages house promise and possibility. The promise and possibility which can arise with the disruption of the traditional narrative of loss is the connection I see to rural education and the need to reframe mindsets.

Troubled Dichotomies: Dual Representations

Freire's (2018) concept of *fear of freedom* can be used in order to develop an understanding of the "troubled dichotomies" that exist in rural areas and in rural life (Azano & Biddle, 2019, p. 5). Troubled dichotomies, or the dual representations, can arise in rural spaces that can trap educators in their ways of problematizing rurality. As a researcher seeking to support rural teachers and rural students, I know I must address my perceptions of those seemingly "loss" aspects of rurality or troubled dichotomies that may play into my construct, or facets of my construct, of rurality. In order to make the shift between a deficit mindset of rurality to one of possibility inside the rural classroom, I must acknowledge and confront the ghosts that exist, but also acknowledge and seek the space for hope in the classroom.

The Deficit Mindset of Rural Student Ability. One of the ghosts that must be challenged in rural education, in order to seek a place of hope (Freire referred to this as love) in the rural classroom, is of the deficit mindset often attached, directly or indirectly, to student ability. The deficit mindset of rural student ability stems from the dominant cultural narrative of rurality as a place of loss. However, rather than just being from a

dominant cultural narrative of rurality, that sense of loss and potentially, even inferiority, filters down into the mindset of rural communities. This distinction matters because of the power that comes with a mindset that exists within a rural community to which the mindset is applied, such as the educator who questioned the ability of one of our students to "make it" in a scholarship program when competing against students from more affluent areas. Although, in hindsight, I know not to assume that their comments were truly representative of their overall belief in the potential of the county's rural students, at the moment I perceived them to be. My perception of the situation spoke to my own deficit mindset of rurality.

Challenging the Deficit Mindset of the Classroom. Challenging a deficit mindset of rurality within rurality means confronting held beliefs about our histories, our preconceptions, and our views of ourselves as rural educators with the goal of honoring the experiences and voices of rural teachers and students. A deficit mindset of rurality in rural spaces matters because of how such a mindset has the potential of impacting the ways in which the voices of rural students are supported by classroom teachers. Thus, as educators in rural spaces, we must tend to any potential deficit mindsets that might be held. As educators, unpacking a deficit mindset of rurality means being willing to confront our own ghosts in order to move forward.

Challenging deficit mindsets of rurality is not just a goal for a school district or an individual school. It is a challenge for the rural teacher in each of their classes. How teaching takes place, the instructional implementation, and context matters in the rural classroom, as in all classrooms, because it speaks to a larger mindset regarding student learning and ability. What, as educators, do we think that our students are *capable* of in

the classroom? What, as educators, do we think that our students are *contributing* to learning in the classroom? In order for teachers to support students, teachers must acknowledge or have a working understanding of the deficit mindset of rurality that can often impact rural people. All of this leads into my third research question: How do teachers in rural schools learn about and incorporate the cultures of their students as tools for making meaning from texts?

Learning in the Rural Classroom: Transmission Versus Agency

In classes where learning is predicated on transmission rather than agency, there is no "mutual discovery by students and teachers" in the learning process (Nieto, 2002, p. 5). Teachers and students are not working together to form knowledge; knowledge is transmitted from teacher to students rather than formed via collaboration between teacher and students. Essentially, students are taken out of the learning process, while their potentiality in the learning process is disregarded. In using learning that promotes transmission rather than agency, learning becomes simply a facsimile of "socially sanctioned knowledge" (p. 5) or "official knowledge" (Apple, 1993, p. 1). It perpetuates the notion that the knowledge and learning that matters is that which comes from the teacher and that which comes from a broad sense of normalcy.

The Banking Model of Education. The model of traditional transmissive education is best described by Freire (1990) via the "banking model of education" where the teacher serves as narrator and students serve as the receptacles, who are filled with the teacher's knowledge. The student is not an active participant, an agent, in the learning process, but becomes an observer, a spectator. Freire explained the concept as a dichotomy where a person exists in the world as "spectator" rather than a "re-creator," as

someone “in the world” rather than “with the world” (p. 75).

Attending to this dichotomy of spectator rather than creator is imperative if we, as educators and researchers, seek to support students in the classroom. The impact of relegating students to spectators in the learning process on students’ identity and self-perception cannot be ignored. Rural too often is used as being synonymous with passivity, where rural students are receptacle for a placeless curriculum (Azano & Biddle, 2019). Supporting students in the rural classroom begins with acknowledging their autonomy.

Supporting Student Agency in the Rural Classroom. As educators, we must consider marginalized student groups (i.e. rural students) and challenge how learning that assigns students to be spectators rather than creators contributes to further marginalization rather than agency. Student agency can only be achieved when students are valued and supported in the classroom through collaboration and creation and through the use of their voices and experiences. I am interested in how transmissive models of education impact rural students and how rural educators and researchers seek other models in the classroom to support students.

Spectator Rather Than Creator. Given Freire’s explanation of the dichotomy between creator and spectator, of depositor and receptacle, of teacher and student, Azano and Biddle (2019) proposed that such a dichotomy would function as a “conceit” for rural leaders, rural teachers, and rural students (p. 83). The role of spectator is internalized by rural leaders, students, and teachers. The role they internalize is not of a re-creator who has power or who has a critical perception of their existence in the world around them. It is not just rural students who find themselves in the role of spectator rather than creator.

Rural teachers and rural leaders can, as with rural students, find themselves in the role of spectator rather than creator within the education system. This positionality is bolstered by the dominant cultural narrative of a deficit view of rurality. This dynamic of the possibly limited agency of rural teachers and leaders is a key facet when considering the ways in which rural students can be supported in the classroom. If rural teachers and leaders have limited control as rural educators regarding the transmissive model of education, then that speaks to a larger problem regarding the view of rural education. If rural educators perceive they are limited in their roles, serving as spectators rather than creators, it would seem the potential to challenge the transmissive system would be an uphill climb. How does a teacher support their students as creators when they, as the teacher, are spectators themselves? The question becomes, can we, as rural educators and researchers, challenge the deficit narrative in rural education to reposition rural students and teachers as creators?

Dispelling the Banking Model. In order to support rural students, teachers must dispel the banking model of education and reclaim the role of creator, not just for themselves as rural educators, but most importantly for their students. When the banking model of education is dispelled, students become active agents and creators rather than spectators in the classroom (Freire, 1990). Dispelling the banking model of education creates space for a new pedagogy, and for rural areas, that space can become one that draws upon the unique lived experiences of rural students. A critical pedagogy is a means of connecting students' rural experience with curriculum. Gruenewald (2008) asserted the need for a critical pedagogy of place that "emphasizes the spatial aspects of social experience," and the need to push educators to be critical about the connection between

their physical place and their educational pursuits and values (p. 308). Rather than a curriculum that is predicated on socially sanctioned knowledge, based on a broader cultural narrative that is not connected to rural places, a critical pedagogy of place draws on rurality and students' connections.

Countering the Narrative of Loss

Knowing the deficit mindset of rurality that comes from the dominant cultural narrative, it is incumbent upon rural educators to counter the narrative of loss in the classroom. Countering that narrative can occur through a critical pedagogy based curriculum in rural schools. Critical pedagogies are crucial in rural education because they push against the prevailing "assumptions, practices, and outcomes taken for granted in dominant culture and in conventional education" (p. 308). Drawing upon rurality in the classroom enforces the idea that there is value in rurality. Students, as well as rural leaders and teachers, can use their rurality, through a critical pedagogy, to critically examine their place in the world, their sense of identity, and their sense of place. This is not to say that we need a glorified narrative of rurality through a critical pedagogy that emphasizes place, but we need a critical pedagogy that uses place as a means of connecting to the unique lived experiences of students. For Corbett (2020), place is a means of organizing a system that is constantly flowing and changing. Just as place serves as a means of organizing what is fluid, so can dialogue serve as a means of organizing, examining, and critically engaging the lived experiences of rural adolescent students.

Critical Literacy and Dialogue with Adolescents' Lived Experiences

I learned the power of student stories my first year teaching in Polk County, and

throughout my time there, I continued to learn about the need to seek those stories.

The Power of Stories: Amanda and Witch Anne

My first year teaching in Polk County, "Amanda" was in my English course at the very end of the school day her senior year. What always struck me about Amanda was how dedicated to the school she was; she truly cared about the school and the people in it. She was always the first to volunteer to help with daily tasks at the school, such as taking care of the school's lunch order to make sure all students received the correct meal or helping to organize school supplies. Amanda had a clear connection to the school, as seen by her desire to actively do things for staff and students. However, that connection did not appear to extend to the classroom. Though she would submit all of her work on time and answer questions when prompted, Amanda openly articulated her disinterest in the senior English curriculum. I wanted Amanda to find a connection with the material in class, yet I seemed to keep missing the mark with the literature I was selecting from the state guidelines.

As I got to know Amanda, I began to learn her story. Amanda loved telling tales about the holler where her family had lived for generations. Stories of Witch Anne who haunted White Oak Mountain were passed down in her family like heirlooms. I heard Amanda telling unsuspecting freshmen the legend of Witch Anne, their eyes wide, hearts beating just a little quicker, hanging on her every word. In an effort to connect with Amanda, I asked students to tell me a story, a narrative essay based upon their family or a specific family member. Amanda started her assignment before she even left the classroom. In the narrative she submitted, told in the voice and dialect of her grandfather, Amanda wove the story of Witch Anne, which was so central to her childhood and the

land she loved. Amanda insisted on sending copies of the essay to her former teachers, her family, and even the county's superintendent.

Finding A Place for Students' Stories

The story of Witch Anne was a story born out of living in a place for a long period of time, over several generations. It is a story that holds importance to a family but does not hold a place in the standard curricula. That was the problem: Amanda did not see herself in the curricula. The narrative assignment was a way to connect to Amanda's experiences. She used her unique voice in engaging in the content of the English classroom. In the same way, I believe that the use of critical literacy, in the form of critical pedagogies, can help bring the lived experiences of students, including rural students and rural experiences, into dialogue with classroom curricula.

Critical Literacy and Dialogue to Support Stories of Students. Critical literacy and dialogue can be used in the classroom in order to support the lived experiences of adolescents living in rural contexts, influencing meaning-making from classroom texts. In order to create space for critical literacy and dialogue within the classroom, challenges concerning dichotomies between teachers and students that do not privilege equity and shared knowledge must be addressed. As I am thinking about how to reframe critical literacy and the work done in rural schools, dialogic pedagogy (Fecho, 2011; Stewart, 2019) provides a lens for viewing ways to make shared knowledge a key driver in the classroom.

Learning and Exploring Together: Teachers and Students Connecting. The moments that stand out the most from my teaching experience were the times that my students and I were learning and exploring together. Students' lived experiences are not

isolated to what occurs inside the classroom and what occurs outside the classroom. Students' lives continue to be lived inside the classroom and what is happening outside of the classroom does not stop while they are in the classroom.

Finding Connection in the Historic. Throughout my time in the classroom, there were huge historic moments on the national stage that had ramifications in our rural community: among them were the deaths of Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown in February 2012 and August 2014, the school shootings at Sandy Hook Elementary School and Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in December 2012 and February 2017. What happened on the national stage mattered in my rural classroom. I remember the days it felt like the whole classroom was muted in grief after another death. I remember the days spent with students constantly looking over their shoulder, checking for exits, following school shootings. The profound weight that came with grappling with those issues, those circumstances, those events, was so much for my students to carry. But my hope was that my class and I could carry the weight together. My students did not need me to carry the weight for them, but as their teacher, I could support them, guide them, and encourage them.

Finding Connections in the Local. While in the classroom, in addition to national stories and events that impacted my students and their community, there were impactful local moments very much rooted in our rural place, specifically the planning, building, and staffing of the Tryon International Equestrian Center. Rather than being a mecca for jobs, many community members found themselves in the position of selling their family farms or the fear of tax increases. My students asked to conduct a debate on the topic, discussing whether or not the Center was the best option for the community.

What came about were well-researched and incredibly passionate arguments in the form of a structured debate. From that sense of place, students were able to critically address a local issue that was indicative of larger economic and cultural narratives. As when talking about events on the national stage, dialoguing about local issues served as a means of critical examination in terms of the lived experiences of students. In critically examining the impact of the incoming Center on their community, students were drawing upon their feelings and perceptions about the issue and the issue's potential to impact the student's community.

Creating an Intentional Space for Transaction in the Classroom

Using national and local stories in the classroom became a way for me to learn more about my students, to explore crucial cultural moments, and for all of us to critically examine the world around us. In order for that to happen, I had to be intentional about creating a space for transaction between students and their peers, as well as between students and myself as their teacher. There had to be these transactions in order for learning together to take place. I believe that learning from transactions does not just occur through exploring specific social issues as seen on the news, though I learned extraordinary things through my dialoguing about them with my students (Fecho, 2011; Fecho et al., 2021; Stewart, 2010, 2019).

A Sociocultural Approach to Teaching with Dialogic Pedagogy. A sociocultural approach to teaching and learning means that schools must create space for teachers and students to transact with curricula. Thus, dialogic pedagogy, which is an approach to teaching that "values questioning, examines context, explores multiple perspectives, challenges hierarchical structures, and views learning as a generative act"

(Stewart, 2019, p. 213) can be a valuable concept. For Azano and Stewart (2016), the use of dialogic pedagogy in the English education program helps preservice teachers learn to use dialogic pedagogy in their own classrooms (Fecho, 2011). Dialogic pedagogy means teachers intentionally bringing the content of the classroom and the lives of students into dialogue with one another (Fecho, 2011). Azano and Stewart (2016) referenced the work of the Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin and applied Bakhtin's work to dialogic pedagogy. For Bakhtin (1984), words and the meaning of words are formed via the context of their usage. Context matters in that the "social atmosphere of the word, the atmosphere that surrounds the object makes the facets of the image sparkle" (p. 277). Azano and Stewart explained that understanding and response are dependent on the other, and that understanding comes from response in conversation. Without dialogue between the speaker and the listener, meaning-making cannot occur.

In my research, I see the dynamic between speaker and listener as being essential to supporting adolescent student voices in the secondary English classroom because of how such dialogue connects to the lived experiences of students, contributes to identity formation, and dismantles existing power structures that marginalize the voices of students. All three of these concepts are interwoven. If we, as educators are truly committed to dismantling existing power structures between teachers and students as they exist in the traditional classroom, then we must actively and intentionally engage in dialogue (Fecho, 2011b; Fecho et al., 2021; Stewart, 2010, 2019).

Adolescents and Identity Formation. Adolescence for a young person is shaped by the time and place in which they are living and what "ways of knowing and reasoning available at any one particular time and place." (Lewis & Petrone, p. 399). The

experiences of adolescents, based on their place, their surroundings, their experiences, and the combination of those things, all shape adolescence for students (Lewis & Petrone, 2010). Adolescence is a time of identity formation and the circumstances and factors around that formation matter when seeking to support students. Teachers can learn from students and having a visible place for dialogue in the classroom reiterates that the experiences of students are just as important and powerful as any curriculum.

Adolescents are full of their own histories and identities. Classrooms, as transactional spaces (Fecho, 2011), provide an ideal vehicle for students to reflect and utilize their own experiences, while also being in dialogue with others. In order to "provide students with the opportunity to use their own reality as a basis of literacy," it is incumbent upon teachers to "develop radical pedagogical structures" that will facilitate such opportunities (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. 151). For Freire and Macedo (1987), the use of students' own language is imperative in the classroom as students utilize their experiences in the classroom. If we hold that adolescence is a time of identity development and that place is part of that identity formation (Theobald & Wood, 2010), then the classroom is a crucial space for adolescent identity to be honored. Adolescent identity and the lived experiences of adolescent students can be supported by teachers through the creation of space in the classroom. If students see that their experiences, that their identity, has a place in the classroom, that reinforces the truth that their identity and experiences are valued.

Critical Inquiry in the English Language Arts Classroom. Fecho (2004) cited an experience teaching the Harlem Renaissance to a diverse group of students, explaining that though he was more knowledgeable about the literature being covered than his

students, his students related to the literature in a way that he could not. As an educator dedicated to a critical inquiry classroom, Fecho "trusted the inquiry process and went in with a willingness to grow and understand with each subsequent effort." (p. 146). Fecho's example of teaching the Harlem Renaissance shows the need for teachers to be willing to be learners. Not only do teachers and students both need to be open learners, but their held belief structures must also be challenged and investigated. Such integration serves as an opportunity for teachers and students "to teeter on that fulcrum of threat, and, using our collective weight, to defy the gravity of our circumstances." (p. 146). That threat to belief structures within an educational framework is a gift because it creates the space for responsibility and responsiveness between the teacher and students, as well as between students. If a classroom is predicated on the mutual exchange of ideas and experiences, it can become a safe space for students to explore and engage in the practice of critical inquiry.

Standard Curriculum and Student Voices. I see the secondary English language arts classroom as an ideal space for supporting student voices. With a reliance on reading novels, short stories, and plays, as well as composing original texts in the form of projects, essays, and reflections, the English language arts classroom is fueled by texts that are being read, shared, critiqued, and reflected upon. Through the teacher's intentionality to seek out stories, the lived experiences of students can become a primary component of reflection in the classroom. However, I believe that in order for students to be willing to share their stories in the classroom, the classroom must first be a place where students feel safe, feel free to express themselves, and feel that their experiences will be valued. The importance of valuing the stories of students holds true for rural

students in rural schools.

Teacher Identity and Rurality

As a group often labeled by a deficit mindset of their place, it is incredibly important for teachers to support the voices of rural students in the classroom, affirming the value of place within the classroom. However, I acknowledge that such a task may be intimidating for teachers in rural schools who may not be from rural places or may not feel that they can connect with issues and characteristics of rurality. Though I was from a rural community, I taught in a rural community two counties away from where I grew up. I did not always perceive that I truly understood the community I was teaching in or that I remained an outsider. My fear was that such a separation between myself and the community, perceived or actualized, would negatively impact my teaching. I was rural, but I was not *their* rural.

Azano and Stewart (2016) surveyed "Jenny", a teacher candidate who did not identify as rural. For Jenny, not being rural fueled concerns that she would be unable to connect with rural students in the classroom, and her expression of this tension - "represents a concern that growing up in a non-rural environment will limit one's effectiveness as a teacher in a rural school and, thus, one's sense of preparedness for doing so." (p. 109). The fear is a perception that being from a rural environment will impact teacher performance. Despite the knowledge that not being rural has an impact on teacher performance in the rural classroom, teachers, regardless of background of place, have the opportunity in the English language arts classroom to connect with students.

Using Dialogic Pedagogy with Standard Curriculum

As previously stated, the English language arts classroom is outfitted with a

curriculum that is filled with space for pedagogical opportunities to share, discuss, reflect, and understand. If teachers are seeking to support their students in the classroom, then they are taking on the opportunities that exist in their curriculum and are creating spaces to seek the lived experiences of students. For example, though the play *Romeo and Juliet* takes place in Renaissance Verona, Italy, students, regardless of the perceived difficulty in relating to the setting, can relate to the text because the relevancy of the text goes beyond setting. Teachers can use dialogic pedagogy and critical inquiry in the classroom in order to help students make connections between the text's universal themes and the lived experiences of students. *Romeo and Juliet* is filled with the struggles of two young people dealing with the expectations of their families, the rush of young love, and the devastation of losing a family member. The characters deal with stress, decisions, and consequences. Students in rural classrooms, like students across the United States and around the world, can relate to the universal themes embedded in *Romeo and Juliet*. When I taught *Romeo and Juliet* with ninth-grade students in rural North Carolina, many nuanced student-led discussions were had regarding connections between the text and students' lives. The pressures of family expectations in the play often manifested for students in the form of the pressures that come from living in the conservative Bible Belt, while racial and ethnic tensions in the community replaced the play's family feuds. Many semesters, upon introducing the play, my students met the material of *Romeo and Juliet* with resistance. However, when we started parsing the play and seeking connections, students were able to find meaning within the text that mattered to them.

Creating the Space to Critique

As the teacher, I had to intentionally make space in my classroom for critique and

had to be open to find opportunities to help foster engagement and support student voices. In order to support student voices and to engage students, classroom teachers must make intentional moves to foster such discussions and explorations. Having the space to critique classroom texts, reflect upon personal connections with the text, and dialogue (Fecho, 2011) with peers and teachers is crucial. If the lived experiences of students are listened to, valued, and affirmed in the classroom, the teacher will be actively engaging with the student while supporting the student's voice, regardless of background. I am not negating the fact that being from different backgrounds than one's students can be difficult in the classroom in terms of relating to experiences, especially when thinking about place. A teacher feeling as though they have difficulty connecting with students due to a cultural or geographic context is a challenge. But I do believe that intentionality and creating opportunities for engagement are key within the English language arts classroom in order to make connections with students.

Drawing Upon Students' Funds of Knowledge. As teachers seek to make meaningful connections with students, the experiences, ideas, and concepts that students hold should be honored and utilized in the classroom. Students have *funds of knowledge* (Fecho, 2011b; González et al., 2005). These funds of knowledge are from the lived experiences of students and can serve as opportunities for engagement in the classroom to "make learning and teaching dynamic, engaging, and meaningful, while still addressing the curricular demands teachers encounter in standards era classrooms" (Azano & Stewart, 2016, p. 109). By intentionally seeking the lived experiences of students, teachers can engage with students in the classroom through collaboration to make meaningful connections between the curriculum and the lives of students. Especially for

rural students whose identities are influenced by their place, the use of lived experiences as a source of exploration, critique, and engagement can positively impact identity formation.

Curriculum needs to matter for students, that is, students need to see themselves in the curriculum of the classroom. The words of former students always echo in my head in this vein of thought: "How does this relate to *me*?" or in other words, what is the connection? Often, rural students do not see their lived experiences in the standard curriculum. The texts that are rural-based are often riddled with stereotypes and deficit mindsets, with rurality as a backdrop for either an idyllic existence, offering little to no critique, or with rurality as an othered place that characters must leave in order to find fulfillment. Narratives that are predicated on the notion that being rural is to be less, othered, or even romanticized are furthering a mindset of rurality that problematizes rural identity for students. Rurality as a form of place should have a spot in the classroom curriculum in order for students to see place, critique place, and connect place with the classroom texts, products, and lived experiences. For Azano (2011), place-based pedagogy is education practices that connect the lives of students as they experience place with the goal of engaging students in a meaningful way. Place-based pedagogy can utilize rurality as a means of connecting the content of the classroom with the content of students' lives.

Finding a Place for All Students' Places. In order for teachers to engage rural students, the connections do not always have to be situated in the concept of rurality as place. I think of those students I taught and my peers during my school years who did not have positive connections to the place of rurality. My closest friend in school, "Sherri,"

spent her formative years in South America. When she moved to the United States, she struggled with adjusting to the community. But Sherri never missed an opportunity to use her South American roots in papers, projects, and discussions. From a short story about learning to dance in Chile to creating a research project and collage on "the Los Desaparecidos" ("The Disappeared") of Argentina's Dirty War, Sherri found her way back home through her personal place-based lens for classroom assignments, inviting her teachers and peers on the journey with her. Sherri's sense of place, though it was not rooted in rural North Carolina, was diasporic in nature – an identity that was the culmination of places and cultures. In seizing the opportunities to talk about and explore Argentina and Chile, Sherri was able to draw upon her funds of knowledge (and create meaning for herself within the assignments. There are students, including rural dwelling students like Sherri, who do not see themselves in their physical place either. Sherri was living in a rural place but did not feel connected in a positive way to what was rural.

Utilizing Funds of Knowledge to Connect with Place. When I think about drawing upon place, I think also of students who do not always feel that they know where their place is (as in, where they feel like they belong) or that their place is not where they physically are at the time. How can their funds of knowledge be utilized in the classroom as teachers seek to support students' voices and lived experiences? In this way, funds of knowledge can be rooted in a place of rurality, where rural students are in terms of physical place, but funds of knowledg*e* can also be rooted in the places, such as past spaces, that students connect beyond the boundaries of physical place. I believe that intentionality of this kind, where educators are open to the lived experiences of students of various backgrounds, is key for educators to remember as they seek to support all

students. As I think about how to best support rural adolescent students, I believe that at the heart of the matter are rural teachers within their rural communities. Supporting rural students in the English language arts classroom is a dynamic that feels natural because of the nature of the traditional English language arts classroom. Typically, the English language arts classroom has a curriculum that is guided by the reading of texts, the writing of essays, each of which lend themselves to exploring, sharing, and creating. In rural communities, teachers historically have served a larger and more symbolic purpose.

The Rural School Teacher

Being from a one-stoplight town, it should come as no surprise that growing up, I saw my teachers not only at school, but also at the store, games, community events, and even church. Rather than just doing lessons with teachers, it felt like you were doing life with them, simply because they were always so seemingly visible within the community. The rural school teacher "plays a varied, important, and socially constructed role in rural communities." (Azano & Biddle, 2019, p. 7). Contributing to the narrative of the rural schoolteacher, who would have served as a community teacher, the story arc of the rural teacher in the one-room schoolhouse remains ingrained in common constructs of rural communities, as rural locales may have smaller schools than their larger counterparts. The rural teacher remains important because "They embody the histories and meanings of place, understand implicit culture and politics, and play a role in the very construction of schooling and influence the value of education." (p. 7). The importance that the rural schoolteacher holds within the community is reflective of rural as place; the rural teacher represents a community that is tightly knit and supportive. In turn, the norms, politics, history, and culture of said rural place are exhibited in the role of the schoolteacher,

though that role is often representative of the distant past.

The Metaphor of the Rural Teacher. The rural teacher serves "as a strong metaphor" in rural communities, one that is endowed with the "narrative of loss" (Azano & Biddle, 2019, p. 7). The rural teacher still conjures a vision of the teacher who is part of the community, who knows the intricacies of a specific time and place. Having remained in the community for the majority of their career, if not all of their career, the rural teacher may have taught multiple generations of the same family. Even the county's superintendent had been one of her students. I remember going through an incoming student list with her and with each student, Mrs. Maze knew a small part of their story without even seeing their face. "I remember teaching her daddy. You know he married the Metcalf girl, his high school sweetheart." "I went to school with his grandfather; he sat in the seat behind me in history class." There was a comfort that students had when they knew she had knowledge of them or a slight connection.

Mrs. Maze represented a view of rurality endowed with possibility because as a rural educator, she was an example of having a positive stance on rurality. Any view held about Mrs. Maze was predicated on the fact that her pedagogy reflected that she believed in rural students and that she respected the rural community. The way she spoke about growing up in the county, how she treated fellow citizens, and how she always encouraged students to be the best versions of themselves, all of these things fed into the pride Mrs. Maze had of being rural and being a rural educator. As a colleague, I saw Mrs. Maze as being a representation of positive attributes of rurality that can be associated with rurality, such as having a close-knit community and a communal identity. However, she also acknowledged work that needed to be done in herself as a teacher, in county

systems, as well as in long-held belief structures that negatively shaded large parts of rural life.

Acknowledging the Deficit Mindset of Rurality

The deficit mindset of rurality (Azano & Biddle, 2019; Biddle & Azano, 2016; Corbett, 2007; Theobald & Wood, 2010) cannot be ignored, but must be acknowledged and tended to by researchers and educators alike. By acknowledging the deficit view of rurality, the rural educator can be part of dismantling the problematic view of rurality that situates rural as a condition of being without. That dismantling comes with acknowledging the narratives of loss that work to "other" rural communities, teachers, and students. Acknowledging narratives of loss, teachers can create space for the formation of critique, the act of reflection, and the search for possibility within rurality (Azano & Biddle, 2019). Because of the symbolic role teachers hold in rural communities (Biddle & Azano, 2016), rural teachers are in a position to be a positive influence in countering the negative view of rurality that impacts rural teachers and students, as well as the rural community.

The influence of the rural educator comes with the role they can play in dismantling the deficit view of rurality; as they represent rurality and place, rural teachers can topple the "core-periphery model" of education that devalues rural in favor of a global mindset (Azano and Biddle, 2019, p. 7). Standard curriculum, with a focus on global rather than rural, promotes the construct that in order to be successful, in order to be relevant, one must look out rather than looking in. The standard curriculum promotes the narrative that in order to be a well-educated and able competitor in the work force, you must have a global mindset. It is true that it is important for students to think beyond

their own worldview and to be global citizens, to have an understanding that encompasses stories that are larger themselves. A worldview that goes beyond where students reside, be that locally or nationally, helps to promote critical thinking and empathy. However, from the standpoint of the standard curriculum, which dictates much of what is taught in classrooms, what is local is seemingly ignored. The notion that in order to be a good citizen, one must think globally, negates the power of what is local and, the case of rurality, what is rural. A global mindset-based curriculum is situated in the global rather than the rural and the result is the further othering of what is rural. The rural teacher and the rural student must concede that the place that they are learning is less than, thus devaluing their place. However, pedagogy that utilizes place shows how place is a positive means for students to explore the world around them.

Rather than the passive knowledge that comes from the "banking model" of education (Freire, 1990), which is devoid of community context, place-based pedagogy helps students find meaning within themselves. Within the banking model, the knowledge passively filling the student is the community with no context (Azano & Biddle, 2019). Place-based pedagogy seeks to connect the lived experiences of students with the content of the classroom, thus seeking contextualization and meaning-making. Putting place in the classroom values the knowledge of a community and supports students as they seek to critically explore their place in their community. By using place and activating place-based knowledge in the classroom as part of the curriculum, teachers are validating, for students, administrators, families, and community members, what is local.

As a member of a rural community and as a former rural educator in the public

schools, I see the incredible power that can be had through using what is rural and what is local in the classroom. The use of place in the classroom shows that the teacher and the school value said place and see its worth in relation to education. With place being used in classroom learning, the validity of place, from the perceived authority of the school-based learning, is ensured. This validity comes from the fact that teachers hold a meaningful position in rural communities, seen as being symbolic of place. But more than just being symbolic of place, teachers are authority figures for their students and often for the larger community as well. When we consider the importance of schools in rural communities and their metaphorical significance, it is unsurprising that the choice of curriculum by a teacher and a school can be impactful. From the traditional view of education, the teacher, as the authority figure in the classroom, can be perceived as assigning value via what is taught. By seeking to draw upon place and the lived experiences from the students who reside in said place, classroom teachers are honoring the place of their students.

The use of place in the classroom is also important when thinking about the lives of rural adolescent students. The lives of students do not stop or pause when they enter the classroom. If we hold that adolescence is a time of identity formation for adolescents and that rurality influences the identity of rural adolescents, then the perception of place matters. How place is viewed by adolescents, how it is discussed or not discussed in the classroom, and how adolescents perceive that place as viewed by others are all part of their identity formation as rural adolescents. Locally based knowledge that comes from place also supports students as they negotiate “global understandings" (Azano & Biddle, 2019, p. 7). A critical understanding of place and how place influences local issues, from

the impact of institutions and economics to issues of race and gender, goes beyond the local sphere and its relation to place. Such critical understanding can be used in understanding global issues and ideas. This is not to say that a globally linked curriculum should be completely removed in favor of a solely place-based curriculum. However, I do believe that classroom teachers can use local knowledge, place-based curriculum (Azano, 2011; Gruenewald, 2008), and dialogic pedagogy (Fecho, 2011a) that seeks the lived experiences of rural students to the great benefit of students.

These pedagogical moves in the classroom have the potential to engage students, encourage critical thinking about the world around them, and establish connections that exist or could exist between place and institutions or social issues. As a former rural school educator and as a researcher concerned with supporting rural students, I am interested in how place is featured in the classroom and the impact that its absence or its presence can have on the identity formation of rural adolescents. In not only implementing a dialogic model within the classroom but also intentionally seeking out the lived experiences of rural adolescent students and including place within the curriculum, I believe that rural teachers can support rural students in a positive way as students' identities are shaped.

Including place in the rural classroom is a means of engaging students and a means of supporting students as they make meaning with curriculum content. Additionally, the use of place in the curriculum is a way of demonstrating to students and the community that place is valued and is worthy of study. This is not to say that the validation of the teacher in regards to place is needed in order for place to have value. Rather, I am noting that the role rural schools and rural teachers in rural communities

remains crucial as they still hold a symbolic, as well as institutional, importance. Another component to consider is how place is treated in the classroom. Are issues of place glossed over? Are the variety of experiences in regards to place being considered? Part of honoring place in the classroom should include being attentive to the historic, current, and future strengths, challenges, and characteristics of a place via a critical pedagogy of place.

Azano and Biddle (2019) asserted that a place-pedagogy rooted in being socially conscious is important because it can serve as a means of hope within communities that have historically been burdened with a profound sense of loss. For rural teachers and rural students, a critical pedagogy of place allows for the naming of the world in which they live. This process of naming one's world within a critical pedagogy of place is a powerful tool for rural teachers and rural students because such a process celebrates the rural place where teachers work, students learn, and where both groups live. Because of the deficit mindset often attached to rurality, a pedagogy of place has the potential to be impactful for rural teachers and students because it is a pedagogy that is rooted in possibility and agency. To shape education through a place-based mindset is to meet students and their community where they are, acknowledging them from their subject position.

Rural student identity, in thinking through a place-based view, maintains that rural students are connected to their sense of place by their local ties (Azano, 2011). The sense of place is crafted, uniquely, by one's goals, life experiences, and personal histories; such connections are brought by the person to their spaces (Hutchinson, 2004). The deficit mindset of rurality is rooted in issues of power in regards to who gets to

control the narrative of rurality. Who tells the story? Historically in education, the issue with the "banking model of education" is in regards to who gets to hold the knowledge. Rurality should be seen in the classroom through its use in the curriculum as well as through the use of the lived experiences of students. Each of these things requires intentionality. Teachers must intentionally seek out dialogue with students. Teachers must intentionally use curriculum that draws upon place in such a way that students will be engaged. Teachers must intentionally create space in their classroom that both honors rural places and allows for critique of those places. Dialogue in the classroom can address power issues in the classroom.

A dialogic stance is needed in the classroom to will the current hierarchical paradigm that exists between teachers and their students (Stewart & McClure, 2013). For Freire (1990), dialogue "is the encounter between [people], mediated by the world, in order to name the world." (p. 63). Though teachers may have their own goals that direct their instructional goals, teachers should "remain open to learning both *with* and *from* our students" (Stewart & McClure, 2013, p. 93). I believe that the English language arts classroom can serve as a space to address issues of power that rural adolescents face as adolescents, as students, and as members of rural communities. By engaging students and having space for critical thinking and dialogue, rural adolescent students can have agency in their education, in their place, and in their rural identities.

Summary

For young people, staying in their rural community means to be loyal but potentially void of or limited in opportunities; to leave the rural community means to betray one's roots (Azano & Biddle, 2019; Corbett, 2007). The sentiment is echoed in

Todd's concerns about colleges; it is echoed in the young rural student who spoke at the conference. To be rural is often to be seen as less. I grew up in a rural area, a literal one-stoplight town. I taught for eight years at a small high school in a rural county. As someone who strongly identifies as rural, who spent their teaching career in rural areas, I am committed to my research to support the efforts of rural teachers in the classroom and the efforts of rural students as they seek to find themselves in the curriculum. I want to troubleshoot this notion that to be rural is to be seen as less.

According to Azano and Biddle (2019), there needs to be a redefining of the "rural school problem" as it now exists in a globalized world. The sociocultural context of rurality matters because the rural experience is varied and nuanced. The industry of a place matters. The diversity of a place matters. The history of a place matters. And the lived experience of an individual student or teacher within that place matters. As I conduct my research on the efforts of rural English language arts teachers to support the lived experiences of rural adolescent students in the classroom, a sociocultural framework is paramount in order to honor rural teachers and students. To understand their place, I must seek out their unique lived experiences rather than relying on stereotypes and deficit narratives of rurality.

Chapter 2: Review of the Literature Review

Introduction

The Impact of a Deficit Mindset: "Why Am I Not in Bridge Club?"

I remember when my student "Will" was in the semi-finalist stage for a prestigious academic program for high-ranking universities. Normally incredibly confident and sure of his person, Will came back from the interview frazzled and dejected. "Ms. Wright, why am I not in a bridge club? Everyone there was in a bridge club and I don't even know what it is! You need to play *bridge* and you need to *not* be from the small town South." Will went on to explain how he felt unqualified being from a small town in the south. Will described how he felt like "a silly redneck" in the waiting room with the other students. "I didn't look nice like them; I looked like the help. And Ms. Wright, I know they were giggling at my accent. I know they thought I was dumb." Granted, Will had just gone through a highly stressful and competitive interview and he was being highly critical of his performance, but his comments stuck with me and spoke to a larger concern. This incredibly hardworking, successful, brilliant, kind, and creative young person was having an identity crisis before my eyes.

Regardless of whether or not anything he perceived from the interviewers or fellow candidates was true – that they viewed him as he perceived they did – the reality remained that Will had taken on those concepts as part of his personal narrative and view of self. That narrative was one that said Will was less than, not as worthy of a placement in a competitive program as the other candidates from places other than the small town south. Will was influenced by the dominant narrative that remains so pervasive in driving a negative and deficit narrative of what is rural. I have no way of knowing what those

interviewers or candidates thought of Will, and it would be unfair of me to speculate, but it was because Will *already* knew the dominant narrative of rural that he transcribed it onto his processing of those interactions. The narrative was one that Will, and possibly most rural students and teachers, already know. A deficit mindset of rurality says that to be rural is to be less (Azano & Biddle, 2019).

Acknowledging and Countering the Deficit View of Rurality

A deficit view of rurality is problematic due to the impact that such a vision might have on rural people, places, and systems. A deficit mindset filters circumstances and situations through the lens of problems rather than through the lens of possibilities. To understand rurality from a deficit view not only ignores the successes of rural people and rural communities, but it focuses on what is perceived as negative, ultimately allowing that negative perspective to be a defining feature of rural (Azano & Biddle, 2019). As a researcher, I believe that it is imperative to avoid viewing rural from a deficit mindset because such a view does not respect the work and lives of rural people. This is especially important when thinking about rural education. The work of rural educators, as should all the work of all educators seeking to support students, should be respected and valued. When rural schools, rural teachers, and rural students are seen as "less than," it can negatively impact their identity. For those from rural places, rurality is part of identity formation (Theobald & Wood, 2010). Identity and rurality are linked, thus, deficit views of rurality that come from dominant cultural narratives impact the "agency" and "self-efficacy" of rural people (p. 18). If the pervasive narrative is that to be rural is to be less than remains unencumbered, it is unsurprising the agency and self-efficacy of rural teachers and students would be negatively impacted.

Acknowledging the Deficit View of Rurality in Education

As a former teacher and now as an education researcher, I believe that it is crucial that I address and tend to the deficit view of rural that not only plays out in dominant culture, but also how it plays out and is used in the rural school setting. We, as researchers, cannot ignore the perceived narratives that exist and how those narratives manifest themselves in and impact the people and places they supposedly inhabit. We must tend to those narratives, acknowledging that such narratives exist, but seeking to support and amplify the voices of rural educators. In order to counter the deficit mindset of rurality, there needs to be a reframing of the "troubled dichotomies" that exist in rural areas and in rural life (Azano & Biddle, 2019, p. 5).

Drawing Upon Rural Literacies

Gee (1989) defined discourses as being "a socially accepted association among ways of using language, thinking, and of acting that can be used to identify oneself as a member of a socially meaningful group or 'social network'" (p. 18). Secondary discourses, or multiple secondary discourses, can function as an "identity kit" (Azano et al., 2021b, p. 60). In addition to your primary discourse, these secondary discourses can both "make up" a facet of who you are as a person, but they can also contribute to "how you understand yourself as a person" (p. 60). Literacy then is the "mastery" of one's secondary discourses (Azano et al., 2021b, p. 60). If we hold that these secondary discourses serve as a social "tool kit" for students, the more discourses they have mastery of, the more able to navigate various circumstances or situations because of their positionality or understanding of other discourses (Azano et al., 2021b).

Donehower et al. (2007) described rural literacies as referring to "the particular

kinds of literature skills needed to achieve the goals of sustaining life in rural areas" (p. 4). Giroux (2004) argued that public perceptions of literacy within rural communities could be shaped by education. "Extreme deficiency" has been one of the labels attached to rural communities due to popular culture over the last century (Donehower, 2007, p. 37). Given this tension between public perception and the potential of education as an agent of change, Donehower (2007) explained that those in rural education must "understand the cultural assumption that affect our own understanding of rural students' literacies, especially as we work to shape those literacies in the composition classroom" (p. 38). First, in understanding rural literacies, rural researchers and educators must excise the possible positionality towards stereotypes of rurality (Donehower, 2007). Rural literacies can function as a means of shaping a person's identity as well as serving a culture capital as a sustaining rural force (Azano et al., 2021b).

Azano et al., (2021b) gave the example of a Midwestern farming community that used piles of corn crops as a means of public protest. The community's understanding of the value of the crop, as well as their understanding of agriculture as a business, made their protest powerful and effective. Our rural students are masters of multiple discourses as well. Rural students will have sustaining rural literacies that can be used as a way to support rural student voices in the classroom. In Chapter 4, I will further explain an example from one of the study's participants, Kerri, who tells the story of a student who hunted on family land. The question is not whether or not students have multiple literacies. They do. The question is whether or not rural teachers will acknowledge, value, and utilize the rural literacies of students, not just as a sustaining practice for the community, but as a means of connecting with and supporting students.

The Use of Place-Based Pedagogy. Specifically, Azano and Biddle (2019) argued for the use of place-conscious pedagogy to serve as a means of seeing the possibility of place. For rural teachers and students, place allows them to "name the world around them" as well as "honor the contexts in which people live and learn." (p. 7). Place, in this way, serves as a lens for teachers and students to examine their worlds, ideas, and constructs. Because this lens of place is being used in the classroom, there is a sense of a privilege of place from the positionality of the classroom, as well as a reinforcement of the idea that place matters. The normalization of the deficit narrative of rurality is impactful to students because it stipulates that to be rural is to be less. Utilizing place in the rural classroom reinforces the opportunities that do and can come from place (Azano, 2011; Azano & Biddle, 2019; Gruenewald, 2008). Intentionally accessing place in the classroom can provide space for teachers and students to reframe notions of rurality and critically examine place as rural people in a rural setting.

The Efforts of Teachers. When thinking about rural education, rather than a deficit mindset, we must be reviewing rural education in terms of the efforts being made by teachers. Rural narratives, ones rooted in a deficit mindset, further perpetuate negative stereotypes of rurality. These rural narratives that are rooted in a deficit mindset are specifically damaging in the education setting as they problematize embodying what is rural, be that in terms of geographic place, characteristics, and ideals. I think to the stereotypes of rurality, most often southern rurality, that plague films and television shows (Gurley, 2015; Reynolds, 2017a; Theobald, 1997). Often filled with portrayals of ignorant characters that hold outdated opinions and exhibit a lack of modernity, texts rely on harmful tropes and stereotypes of rurality for the purposes of humor or drama via

othering (Pozner, 2010). However, those texts are not limited to the distant past, but are still prevalent in contemporary film and television. Film and television texts that display stereotypes of rurality, along with constructs that have become widely accepted, remain influential in crafting a narrative of rurality which others what is rural (Reynolds, 2017a; Theobald & Wood, 2010).

Rural Student Identity and the Deficit Mindset

To be rural is to be different in a way that is not categorized as unique, but as effectively deficient. The deficit narrative extends to people, such as that rural people lack knowledge of the world, and to the lack of upward mobility afforded in rural places, such as limited chances for advancement in the areas of business or higher education. Whether the deficit view of rurality is attributed to people, opportunities, or institutions, it has a profound impact on those within said rural community. The deficit narrative has the potential to alter how rural people, places, and institutions are viewed on a national level, as well as the potential to alter how they view themselves in their communities (Corbett, 2007; Dahill-Brown & Jochim, 2018; Theobald & Wood, 2010). That is why a deficit mindset is so harmful to rural students – it can color the identity and experience of being rural. For adolescent students who are coming into their own identity, which is shaped by place, the heavy influence of a deficit mindset could negatively impact their held sense of self in terms of their worth, potential, and ability.

I can recall numerous times while teaching that my rural students articulated a lack of ability as attached to where they were from: “People like us don’t go to schools like that” or “We can’t compete with those kids from the city.” When feeling compared to others, I perceived that there was a sense of shame. The experience of being rural or

living in a rural area, for a lifetime or a period of time, should not be marked by shame. By viewing rural from a deficit mindset, we are lessening the lived experiences and narratives of those that are from that space. If we are truly valuing the experiences of others, such mindsets can never hold.

School Structures and Policies in the Rural Classroom

The pervasive deficit mindset of rurality is a hindrance in rural education (Azano & Biddle, 2019). Rural school systems and schools are seen as being at a disadvantage because they are rural due to assumptions and stereotypes (Azano & Stewart, 2015, 2016; Miller, 2012). That mindset is further emphasized often by the challenges that rural school systems can often face, such as limited resources, teacher retention, and recruitment (Azano & Stewart 2015, 2016; Miller 2012; Monk 2007). To better understand the status of rural contemporary schools, we must first take a step backwards and define what rural, in terms of a working definition, is and how it is defined.

Defining Rural Places and Rural Schools

Defining Rural

Definitions and classifications of rural are important when thinking about rural schools. In many places, rural is defined in contrast to what is urban. Rural is what is not urban (Malkus, 2018). The National Center for Education Statistics (n.d.) and United States Census Bureau (Radcliffe et al., 2016) both use urban-centric locale-based definitions, using locale categories of fringe, distant, and remote. Such terms as fringe, distant, and remote can have less than ideal associations. If we got into parsing, words like fringe, distant, and remote further push the notion that to be rural is to be literally and figuratively away from the presumed normative culture (i.e., what is urban). Even

definitions and categories are feeding into the narrative that to be rural is to be somehow other or somehow less (Rasheed, 2020).

Defining Rural School Districts

In thinking about the classification systems, it is important to consider them in light of school districts. Malkus (2018) explained that a concern regarding the National Center for Education Statistics classification system of rural is that "while every *school* can be specifically accounted for as belonging to one locale, school *districts* can include schools from different locale classifications." (p. 12). As an example, Malkus posited that a "suburban" labeled school district could have multiple schools categorized as "rural" (p. 12). The distinction between school district classifications and school classifications is important to consider because rural communities are located across the country. Whole districts can be rural but rural schools can be located in majority suburban districts. Just because a school is within a suburban district, does not mean that it does not have the successes and challenges that might come with being a rural school.

Rural School Districts by the Numbers. In the United States, rural school districts represent a significant percentage of its districts and, therefore, rural schools and rural students should not be regulated to a data point. Though rural school districts housed only 18% of K-12 public school students in the United States during the 2013-2014 school year, that same year 53% of school districts were rural districts (Dahill-Brown & Jochim, 2018). Rural school districts account for fewer students per district because of lower population densities and that reality could potentially be used as a contributing factor in seeing rural school districts and, subsequently, rural students as being less important to direct research towards. With that potential line of thinking in

mind, I believe that it is imperative to acknowledge that there are important characteristics of rural school systems that rural education researchers need to consider because the related data can shed light on challenges and opportunities in rural schools.

Challenges and Opportunities in Rural School Districts

In order to promote a view of rural education that seeks possibilities while also considering challenges, it is crucial to examine the characteristics of rural schools and rural school districts. Characteristics such as geographic area covered, staff employed, students enrolled, and budgets must all be considered when thinking about the context of rural education. The size of rural schools is important to consider; rural schools are often smaller in size due to being located in low-populated areas (Malkus, 2018). Because of their smaller size in comparison to centralized schools in more populated areas, rural schools may comparatively have a more difficult time providing "specialized programs and services" (p. 9). Because rural schools often have limited budgets and a smaller teaching staff, they might not have the same services provided to students.

The Complexities of Extracurricular Activities. From my experience teaching in a small rural school district, we were not always able to provide certain extracurricular activities that I knew were available in close-by larger school districts, such as Quiz Bowl and Debate Team. Though other extracurricular activities were sponsored for students that would foster engagement and lend themselves to the strengths of faculty members, such as Poetry Out Loud and Bridge Building Team, I was well aware that we did not have the resources to provide what other districts could because of funding and lower staff numbers. Regardless of whether or not the limited number of extracurricular activities, due to the school size and budget, altered student engagement, graduation rate,

or success post-graduation, there was often still the stigma of a lack of chances. Not only do school budgets impact programming at schools, it also directly impacts per pupil spending. Small rural school districts typically spend less per pupil than the average school and rural schools often have to rely immensely on state-level support for financing because they typically lack local revenue (Shuls, 2008).

The Complexities of Funding. Because of the reliance on state funds, according to Shuls (2008), suburban and urban taxpayers "tend to subsidize education in rural areas" (p. 111). This reliance of state funds creates a problematic scenario where taxpayers outside of rural areas see rural education as theirs to structure. Those taxpayers outside of rural areas might see rural education as draining in terms of being an economic need. In addition, many people involved in policy or education outside of the rural community may view themselves as decision makers for the seemingly lacking rural school district. This perceived lack contributes to the deficit mindset of rurality.

The Complexities of Post-Graduate Opportunities. While rural school size and budget are characteristics that can impact student experience while enrolled in school, there are characteristics of rural communities that have the potential to impact schools post-graduation. Upon graduation from high school, rural alumni may have fewer workplace and education opportunities (Edmondson & Butler, 2010; Malkus, 2018), due to "looser links to the urban-centered economies than their urban peers" (Malkus, 2018, p. 10). The sparse employment and limited higher education opportunities, in most cases, stem from graduates being physically distant from urban or suburban areas that house a greater breadth of jobs and institutions. If a graduate wants to remain in their hometown or familiar locale, post-graduate opportunities might be harder to find without moving or

commuting. For many young people just out of high school, moving or commuting might not be financially possible. The tension between staying with limited opportunities and leaving one's community furthers the deficit narrative (Carr & Kefalas, 2009; Corbett, 2007).

The Complexities of Federal Education Policies. Characteristics that are true for many rural schools in comparison to other districts, such as less spending per pupil, fewer staff members, and limited programs, are further problematized via education policies at the federal level. Federal-level education policies can have a profound impact on rural schools as rural school are different in terms of size, structure, and finances; No Child Left Behind (NCLB) brought "specific challenges" in implementation in rural schools (Edmondson & Butler, 2010; Jimerson, 2005), as did Race to the Top (RTT) and the School Improvement Grant (SIG) program (Player & Husain, 2018). These challenges include, but are not limited to, small school sizes, the remoteness of the district, and district-level hardships (Jimerson, 2005). Though these education policies are geared towards student equity, the demands on rural teachers and other issues with implementation preclude the policies from being easily carried out in rural school. Instead, such policies further the deficit mindset of rurality.

Rural Schools in the Twenty-First Century

Staying Versus Leaving Dichotomy

The consequences of such a shift towards national standardization in education lies in the concept that to be successful, in terms of wealth specifically, rural adolescents must leave their communities and go to the city (Carr & Kefalas, 2009; Corbett, 2007). Those adolescents that choose to stay in their rural communities are often viewed,

stereotypically, as less intelligent than their peers, embodying little ambition. The dichotomy created regarding those adolescents who stay and those that leave is problematic. Such a dichotomy stipulates that to be successful, you must leave your community, reinforcing the deficit mindset of rurality. On the surface, there is the reality that there are highly intelligent students that leave their rural communities, yes, but there are also highly intelligent students that stay. Petrin et al. (2014) found that though there is some outmigration of high achieving students, many of the students with greater community attachment are those amongst the highest achieving.

Rural Identity and the Stigma of Leave Versus Stay

A harmful stigma comes when students feel that they are relegated to one of two options for post-graduation. To leave one's rural community is an act of betrayal (going beyond one's raising), but to leave means seeking success. Teaching in a rural community, many of my students were all too aware of this leave or stay paradox that they seemingly inherited. For those whose identity was closely aligned with the rural community, the idea of leaving and being separated from their community was a struggle. I think about students who struggled with wanting to leave for post-secondary education, but felt that they could not meet their future goals outside of the community. I think about Todd who told me, "Guys like me, we stay. We don't leave." I think about students who had family obligations that prevented them from moving away for work or school, like Maria and Pamela, who were each needed to financially contribute to the household income and to care for younger siblings.

To be rural equates to a lack of potential. To leave rural equates to a lack of loyalty (Azano & Biddle, 2019; Corbett, 2007). As an education researcher and former

rural school teacher, I am aware of the negative impact that can come with any deficit view that impacts the choices, self-perception, and experiences of rural students. Rather than being supported in their post-secondary efforts, students are being faced with a perceived either-or fallacy as defined by their choices. Within the rural school problem as it directly impacts the efforts of rural students, rather than being empowered by their sense of place, there is the potential that students are further marginalized in comparison to their peers (Corbett, 2007; Theobald & Wood, 2010).

Rural Schools and Their Rural Communities

Rural schools hold an influential position in their rural communities (Biddle & Mette, 2017; Edmondson & Butler, 2010; Player & Husain, 2018; Reynolds, 2017b). Beyond the obvious importance of being where the community's young people are educated, rural schools, often located in thinly populated areas, can be one of a small number of social institutions in the area, as well as being a significant employer for the area (Biddle & Azano, 2016). Schools are a huge part of many rural communities (Biddle & Mette, 2017; Reynolds, 2017b). Not only do schools serve as one of the community's largest employers, but it is often the center of activity, from sporting events to public services (Biddle & Azano, 2016; Biddle & Mette, 2017). A picture can easily be painted on the value of schools within rural communities. Schools can serve as stable institutions in their rural locale, which must provide communities comfort given the changing economic landscape of many previously stable rural-based institutions, such as textiles, coal, and forestry (Biddle & Azano, 2016). Given that schools frequently serve as one of the largest employers of a community, a connection beyond schools as a place where young people are educated is unsurprising.

For many rural communities, school means more than just a building; school is place. Just as teachers become a metaphor for rurality (Azano & Biddle, 2019), rural schools, where classes are conducted and where teachers are employed, can be representative of rurality. The representation of rurality as embodied by schools can show both the possibilities and challenges of rurality for a community (Azano & Biddle, 2019). With the personal connection that communities have with their local schools, a positive view of the schools, as well as a negative view, can influence the narrative of rurality held by community members. The narrative of rurality as held by a community can impact rural community members in different ways, but I want to think now about how rurality impacts rural students (Biddle & Mette, 2017; Edmondson & Butler, 2010; Player & Husain, 2018; Reynolds, 2017b; Theobald & Wood, 2010).

Rural Schools and Rural Student Identity

The view of rural schools can impact students' perception of rurality and, therefore, influence their identity formation as rural adolescents (Theobald & Wood, 2010). The rural school is part of the community identity and the identity of a locale's rural residents. It can be part of their concept of place (Azano, 2011; Azano & Biddle, 2019; Corbett, 2007). I think specifically about rural secondary students and their connection with their school as place. For rural students in secondary school, they can potentially spend a large portion of their days at school from going to class, participating in extracurricular activities, to being part of school events (Azano & Biddle, 2019). Just as rural communities can be influenced by their local school, students are influenced by a unique school culture. Students are involved in and are influenced by their school culture and that matters when thinking about efforts to support rural students.

Rural Narratives of Identity for Rural Students

Narratives concerning rurality in schools can be shaped in relation to school culture, including in regards to what it means to be rural as an adolescent (Theobald & Wood, 2010). Is there a positive narrative of rurality that is prevalent within the school, or is the narrative of rurality one that is negative? Does the narrative of rurality held by the school ignore issues of rurality in terms of students being marginalized or issues that are problematic?

"We're Chargers. We're Better": A Narrative. I think of the rural high school that I attended as a rural adolescent. There was a sense of pride instilled by the faculty with being part of the school. "Mr. Hart.," our principal, would do the announcements over the intercom, ending each day with the pronouncement "Remember folks: We're Chargers. We're better." Said at the end of every announcement, the statement became a motto for our high school. When there was an issue at school, such as a failure to properly dispose of all trash at lunch, Mr. Hart brought out an altered version of wise sage words: "We're Chargers. We throw away our trash." When the school performed well on testing, the accomplishment or goal met was another reason to affirm our status as Chargers. To be a Charger came to mean not just being a student at Crest Senior High School, but being part of the Boiling Springs and Shelby communities. Being part of the community was affirmed and valued. The community was invested in the school and the school was invested in the community. One of the largest organizations in the school was Key Club, which required students to volunteer in the community. Local churches fed the entire state champion football team before every home game. But in the midst of all the positive connections, that is not the reality for everyone, such as was the case of my

friend Sherri who lived in a rural community but never identified as or felt accept as rural.

School Culture and Rural Narratives. Narratives of rurality and what it means to be rural also play into a school's culture. Some narratives of rurality are endowed with positivity, therefore possibly yielding an uplifting view of rurality for rural students (Azano & Biddle, 2019; Corbett, 2007). Other narratives of rurality are endowed with a deficit mindset, therefore possibly yielding a negative view of rurality for rural students (Azano & Biddle, 2019; Corbett, 2007; Theobald & Wood, 2010).

I propose that as rural researchers we should look at language (Gee, 1990) and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Nieto, 2002) as means of how the narratives of rurality for adolescent rural students are shaped and can be reshaped. Language is a system of communication and impacts how people interact and function within social structures (Gee, 1990). I think of Freire (1990) and his concept of reading the world. Does the group in question, in this case rural adolescents, perceive themselves as empowered to read their world? Or, has a perception of a lack of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Nieto, 2002) manipulated their potential to read and shape their world (Freire, 1990)? The ideologies within societies impact the construct of our concepts of what it means to be humans and our perceptions of the world around us (Gee, 1990). Much of the power within systems of discourse is predicated on cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Nieto, 2002) and "the culture of capital" (Delpit, 1988). A deficit mindset of rurality (Corbett, 2007; Theobald & Wood, 2010) can shape the identity of rural adolescents and how they read their world. Re-contextualizing rurality as a place of possibility (Azano & Biddle, 2019) can serve as means of supporting the perceptions of rurality of rural adolescents.

This shift and re-contextualizing of rurality can occur in the English language arts classroom through intentional dialogue (Stewart, 2010) and meaning-making between the unique lived experiences of students and the content of the classroom (Fecho, 2011a, 2011b).

The Efforts of Rural Teachers

As a former public school teacher, I believe that teachers are a key component in creating a space to discuss place and rurality in the classroom, not to serve as leaders in the class, but to serve as collaborators as students make meaning (Freire, 1990). Holding that teachers are a key component in the classroom, the work and efforts of teachers should be examined. Teacher quality and student achievement has regularly been linked, thus, having schools staffed with high-quality teachers is an ideal strategy for advancing student achievement (Player & Husain, 2018). For rural schools, staffing schools full of high-quality teachers is complicated due to the challenges facing rural school districts across the United States. Often, factors such as geographic isolation, limited resources, and demographics can negatively impact the recruitment of top-tier teachers.

Connecting Classroom Curriculum with the Lives of Rural Students

The challenges of staffing rural schools with high-quality teachers are just part of the equation for researchers interested in supporting teachers and the students they serve. In particular, I am concerned with the ways that a disconnect between curricula and students' lives also creates tension for teachers working in rural contexts. When curricula are not driven by efforts to connect to students' cultural contexts and do not welcome students' cultures (Delpit, 1995) or incorporate their funds of knowledge (González et al., 2005), teachers and students have little reason to truly engage in learning. A lack of

engagement and avoidance of place can create a disconnect for students (Edmondson & Butler, 2010).

The Absence of Rural in Curriculum

Edmondson and Butler (2010) reference a primary school assignment that required children to find and compare the numbers on their neighbors' houses. The seemingly simple homework assignment, which asks students to examine house numbers, is problematic because it cannot be completed by, or it would be difficult to be completed by, many rural students due to the sparse nature of many rural areas. This assignment is just one example of how the standard curriculum can exclude rural students because of a lack of connection between the student and the material. Though the example seems small, it illuminates how easily facets of the rural experience and the lived reality of students can be unaccounted for in standard curriculum.

Acknowledging the Lack of Rurality in Standard Curriculum. An acknowledgement of how rural can be absent or not considered in curriculum is needed in order to appreciate the ways in which rurality is often subscribed to a narrative that others rural people and rural communities (Azano, 2011; Azano & Biddle, 2019; Biddle & Azano, 2016; Edmondson & Butler, 2010). The othering of rural people and rural communities furthers what is often a deficit mindset of rurality (Corbett, 2007). I see the lack of inclusion of rurality in the classroom as being a two-part issue. First, the lack of inclusion might be due to the fact those crafting curriculum do not see rural as needing to be included because the vast majority of students in the United States are not rural (Reynolds, 2017b). Second, what is included of rurality within the standard curriculum is often indicative of a deficit mindset of rurality and is rooted in rural stereotypes.

The Impact of the Lack of Rurality in Standard Curriculum on Students.

What if students feel absent in the curriculum in their identity as rural? What if students feel stereotyped in the curriculum in their identity as rural? Students should be able to engage with and relate to the curriculum in the classroom. If rurality is viewed from a deficit perspective via the classroom curriculum, rural students could potentially be negatively impacted by the deficit perspective of rurality coming from the classroom teacher as they enact said curriculum (Azano, 2011; Azano & Biddle, 2019). If students do not see themselves represented, or do not see themselves positively represented, within the curriculum, they may not be engaged in the material. In order to engage students in the curriculum of the classroom, knowing that the standard curriculum does not always make room for rurality and the lived experiences of students, teachers must seek ways to support students as they seek to make meaningful connections with the material.

How Rural English Language Arts Teachers Can Engage Students

Given that so much of the standard curriculum ignores rurality, how can secondary English language arts teachers support and engage rural students in the classroom? In addition to implementing place-based pedagogical approaches into the curriculum, I am thinking specifically about how classroom teachers can use dialogic pedagogy (Fecho, 2011a, 2011b; Stewart, 2010) and critical inquiry as a means of seeking the lived experiences of their rural students.

Regional Interests. Edmondson and Butler (2010), in discussing data collected on youth and children from Pennsylvania's North Tier, articulated how the young people in their community of study had a range of interests and activities that they were involved

in, such as farming, hunting, and NASCAR. However, as noted by Edmondson and Butler, "These topics are not typically found in the prepackaged curriculum used in rural schools" (p. 155). The teachers of the North Tier see the need for local connections in curriculum that will engage their students by directly connecting to students' lived experiences. Because rurality is not uniform and narratives of rurality change from state to state and county to county, the personalization of place-based to fit the needs of students is key for classroom teachers. In some rural areas, for example, farming might not be commonplace, but horse-related activities, such as riding and jumping, might be prevalent a.

Being Mindful of Regional Place Differences. I believe that part of honoring rural communities means understanding that they are not all the same. Though I grew-up in a rural community, it did not mean that my rural experience was the same as my students' rural experience. Rural teachers must be mindful about place-based differences in the classroom and must be intentional in attending to the varieties of place-based experiences and backgrounds, as well as conceptions of place. To assume that all rural students have the same perceptions and experiences of rurality would potentially be to further stereotype students in regards to rurality.

Teachers and How Place Can Be an Opportunity

In addition to looking at the ways in which teachers can connect to the lived experiences of rural students in the classroom, I want to address another way in which dismissing students' contexts and cultures marginalizes rural contexts. A common theme rural scholars address in their work is the problem of seeing the local context as not being a place where aspirations can be achieved. The narrative that often becomes attached to

rural students is that they must leave their rural communities in order to be successful (Carr & Kefalas, 2009; Corbett, 2007; Eckert & Petrone, 2013). It furthers a narrative that rural communities are spaces of being "backwards" or left behind. It is the idea that the rest of the world has progressed while rural has not. According to Howley et al. (1996), the "general outlines" regarding rural youth's aspirations stand historically that rural youth have "lower" goals toward education and occupations (p. 150).

The Narrative of Ambition. I saw variations of this stay versus leaving narrative (Carr & Kefalas, 2009; Corbett, 2007), a narrative that assigned a lack of ambition with staying in one's rural place, when I was growing-up in my rural hometown as well as when I was teaching in a rural county. The story went, "I guess they're just fine staying here in town and settling" or "I always thought they'd want more." What makes a student want to stay rather than leave, or leave rather than stay? A rural community is impacted by numerous contexts that are all interrelated, such as social, geographic, and economic contexts (Cherkowski & Schnellert, 2017).

By being aware of the interrelated impact of these contexts, rural educators can assist students whose educational choices or opportunities may be impacted by social or economic factors. A graduate's choice could be rooted in professional or economic concerts, or it could be rooted in familial obligations. While a sense of loyalty to one's place is often associated with remaining, remaining can be equated to a lack of goals in terms of education and career aspirations. In their study, Howley et al., (1996) found that rural adolescents held a "sense of place" that served as "a legitimate aspiration" (p. 150). In staying in their rural communities, the goal of many young people is to obtain or retain a sense of security or belonging in place. That desire or aspiration for a sense of place is

in possible opposition to a focus on the individual. Acknowledging that being mobile and not attached to a geographic location would presumably allow for additional opportunities for the young person, the decision to remain committed to a rural place is notable.

Pedagogical Practices Informed by Dialogism and Critical Literacy

For eight years, I taught at the Early College in Polk County. Local narratives were often that our students were troubled, unsocial, academically struggling, or, most often, a problem. For the rural students at the Early College, the narrative that they were a problem or that they were different seemed to add another layer onto the existing deficit narrative of rurality already applied to them as rural students. Many times, students questioned their placement in the school. *Why am I here? Would I be happier with my friends at the regular high school? Do people think we are weird?* Others were holding onto old narratives about their ability in the classroom. I frequently had students whose confidence was shaken in middle school due to the actions of peers, comments of teachers, or expectations of guardians. It felt like my students were being handed narratives that were not of their choosing. Each narrative was piled onto the one before, each prescribing a new story.

"Sarah" was a sophomore in my writing class. She was diligent but unsure of her abilities in class. A harsh critic of herself, Sarah sometimes got frustrated when it took her a little more time to finish an assignment or grasp a concept. With each assignment, she did her best, always striving to succeed, which she always did. In one assignment, students were to reflect on a news magazine's running editorial, picking an edition that stood out to them. Stephanie read the essay of Barbara Corcoran, the American

businesswoman of *Shark Tank* fame. Through persistence and determination, Barbara overcame her school-age academic insecurities to build a real estate empire. In her own essay, Sarah detailed how she saw herself in Barbara. Sarah connected with the narrative and made meaning from it. Reflecting upon Barbara's story helped Sarah better understand and articulate her personal story. That essay was a turning point for Sarah. She and I had a dialogue through that piece of writing via her writing, my responding, and further conversations after that. Sarah was telling me her narrative. It was not the narrative prescribed to her by her previous teachers, or even me, but the one Sarah was literally writing for herself. How often do students get to control or even contribute to the narrative?

Rural students often encounter a deficit mindset because they are rural. Corbett (2007) in his study on outmigration trends in rural students in a Canadian coastal community found that many young people left their community. They left because the construct of staying in one's rural community was perceived as failing or not reaching one's aspirations. In Polk County, many students were further stereotyped because of their race, ethnicity, religion, or the side of the train tracks on which they resided. These are all things that students do not have the power to change to or alter, but such factors have the potential to negatively impact the agency and self-perception of students. Knowing how the sociocultural context of the lives and lived experiences of rural students can impact their identities and perception of abilities, how can teachers seek to support their students?

Language and dialogue, which are at the heart of the English language arts classroom, is also at the heart of the ways in which rural English language arts teachers

can seek to support their students. According to Bakhtin (1983), language is in a constant state of flux. Within the space of conversation, for Bakhtin, words take on a future-oriented answer. Understanding within the conversation comes from the connection with the response. As explained by Azano and Stewart (2016), the meaning of any articulation is influenced by the speaker and the listener. Pedagogy built from Bakhtin's construct of dialogue (1983) is dialogic pedagogy (Fecho, 2011a; Stewart, 2010). Dialogic pedagogy involves the pedagogical moves of the teacher to bring the content of the classroom into dialogue with the unique lived experiences of students (Fecho, 2011a).

Dialogism as a Pedagogy to Counter the Deficit Mindset of Rurality

The dialogic classroom "is one in which literacy is used to immerse teacher and students in an ongoing reflective conversation with the text of their lives." (Fecho, 2011b, p. 5). I believe that a dialogic classroom can serve as a pedagogical tool to support teachers as they seek to support their students. Empowering students in their identity as rural adolescents can occur in the English language arts classroom when students are given a seat at the table at which they can critically engage with the curriculum, hear different perspectives, and participate in the creation of meaning.

This is the space where I see the need for a dialogic classroom (Fecho, 2011b) and countering the deficit mindset of rurality as coming together. The dialogic classroom (Fecho, 2011b), one which is based on Bakhtinian principles (Bakhtin, 1983) using dialogic pedagogy (Fecho, 2011a; Stewart, 2010), includes with "some regularity": the proposing of questions with all involved "authoring" responses, the accepting of the "non-neutrality of language" and its context, the advocating of many perspectives rather than just one, the resistance to pre-existing hierarchical structures, and the mutual

understanding that learning is ever-evolving (Fecho & Botzakis, 2007, p. 550).

Drawing Upon Rural Students' Funds of Knowledge

Through intentionally seeking the unique lived experiences of rural adolescent students in the classroom, teachers acknowledge and support student voices in the space that traditionally has put students in the role of spectator rather than creator. In the dialogic classroom, students are encouraged to draw upon their funds of knowledge (González et al., 2005) as part of the meaning-making process. In order to counteract the "rural school problem" and the ways in which it negatively impacts rural adolescent students, the stories of students need to be heard and honored by their teachers and their peers.

At its root, the "rural school problem" (Cubberley, 1914) is derived from stereotypes of rurality. In addition to impacting how rural communities are viewed, those negative stereotypes of rurality impact those within rural communities and how they view themselves, including school administrators, school faculty, and students. Given that schools are historically centers of the rural community due to the value placed on teachers who teach at local schools, the employment opportunities available at local schools, and the resources available at local schools through programming, the effort to challenge the deficit narrative of rurality is most powerful from that space. Students who are part of a dialogic classroom are collaborators in the space of the classroom and I see that as a means of building agency in rural students because their voices are respected, honored, and heard.

I see rural adolescent students as facing three possible issues in the classroom: (1) not feeling empowered in the classroom because they are limited to being a spectator

via the traditional "banking model" of education (Freire, 1990), (2) lacking engagement in the curriculum because of an absence of intentional space for their lived experiences, and (3) being negatively impacted by the deficit mindset of rurality narrative. I see these three potential issues as being interconnected and their interconnectedness is why a learning-centered classroom (Fecho et al., 2021) is important for supporting rural students. Rural schools, including administrators, teachers, and students, can be negatively impacted by a deficit mindset of rurality that questions the ability and potential of those from rural communities.

The deficit mindset of rurality is further exacerbated by the limited presence of place in standard curriculums that are taught in classrooms, including rural classrooms. Finally, if rural classrooms are modeled after the "banking model" of education, students are not active participants in their learning environment of the classroom. Rural students are grappling with a deficit mindset of rurality that is not countered by the inclusion of rurality in the curriculum or with the inclusion of the unique lived experiences of students. Additionally, the traditional classroom lacks the voices of rural students as they seek to make meaningful connections with the content of the curriculum and the content of their lives.

Supporting Student Voice with in the Learning-Centered Classroom

The learning-centered classroom (Fecho et al., 2021) can serve as a means to support the voices of rural adolescent students in the English language arts classroom. Within a dialogic classroom, rural students can control their own narrative in a space that has historically been denied to them because of the lack of place within standard curriculum and the traditional model of education. The lived experiences (Fecho, 2011a,

2011b), funds of knowledge (González et al., 2005), and belief systems of students are powerful and can be drawn upon for students to make meaning with the content of the classroom. I think of the work of Delpit (1995) who discussed the power and the importance of one's beliefs, stating, "We do not really see through our eyes or hear through our ears, but through our beliefs. To put our beliefs on hold is to cease to exist as ourselves for a moment – and that is not easy." (p. 46). For such meaningful dialogue to take place, we must hold that "people are experts on their own lives" (p. 47) and acknowledge they are the only ones that truly know their own story, we must hold that people act rationally because they are rational beings, and we must be vulnerable in order to allow others into our realities.

Rural adolescent students are in the process of forming their identity while they are in high school. They are impacted by their experiences inside the classroom and outside of the classroom. They have funds of knowledge (González et al., 2005), belief systems, and values that inform their decision-making and plans for the future. Honoring rurality and truly seeking to counter the deficit mindset of rurality means to acknowledge that rural students are experts in their lived experiences. Implementing a dialogic classroom requires intentionality and vulnerability on the part of the teacher, in order to create a space that allows for dialogue and discourse between students and their teacher, as well as with their peers. However, if teachers are vulnerable and intentional in seeking out the lived experiences of students through the implementation of a dialogic classroom, the deficit mindset of rurality can begin to change. Change can happen because rurality will be honored through the sharing and exchange of rural adolescent voices that speak to the experiences, beliefs, and ideas of those in rural places (Azano, 2011; Azano & Biddle,

2019).

Rural Lived Experiences Affecting Teaching, Learning, and Literate Practices

Researchers, teacher educators, and teachers who are interested in making schools places that welcome and value the experiences of rural students must think about the ways students are making meaning at a crucial time in their lives. Acknowledging adolescence as a nuanced time is crucial for teachers who are interested in ensuring that students' voices (Lewis & Petrone, 2010) are valued and welcome in English classroom.

Valuing Student Voice in the English Language Arts Classroom

Lewis and Petrone (2010) explored the concept of student voice in a study designed to examine preservice teachers' perceptions of adolescence. One participant explained adolescence as being "tumultuous and stressful time in a person's life as [adolescents] shed one identity and attempt to fit into the world in a new way." (p. 402). Participants, in considering ways in which their future adolescent students would connect with adolescent fictional characters in a variety of texts, understood adolescence in a more nuanced way that acknowledges the complexities of adolescence and the strengths it brings to experiences.

Teachers' Perceptions of Adolescence

I believe that these held concepts of adolescence by preservice teachers (Lewis & Petrone, 2010) are important to consider because how those held concepts might impact the ways in which preservice teachers seek to support students. If teachers acknowledge that adolescence is a time of stress, transition, and complexity for their students, they will potentially be able to support students. I see this support as being enacted by classroom teachers through the selection of material and topics that would be meaningful to students

and through the prioritizing of student dialogue. In my research, I am concerned with the efforts of teachers to support the voices of rural adolescent students. I will have to be sensitive to the ways in which teachers' concepts of adolescence (Lewis & Petrone, 2010) might impact their efforts, but also how the held concepts of rurality might impact the efforts of teachers to support students.

Through the work of Lewis and Petrone (2010), I am reminded of the need to consider the perceptions of adolescence as held by teachers as those perceptions will impact the ways in which teachers seek to engage with students. The beliefs held by teachers will impact what occurs with curriculum, dialogue, and other pedagogical moves (Azano, 2011). However, I am also aware of how the perceptions of students are also important to consider when thinking about engagement in the classroom. I am especially interested in how the perceptions of students might change when they occupy a different role than they traditionally do within the classroom.

Adolescent Students' Perceptions of the Classroom

In Gordon's (2019) study of the use of critical English education in the classroom and students' perceptions of it, there was a shift for the student participants from being "receptacles" to being "critical agents" (Freire, 1990; hooks, 1994). As critical agents, the students were constructing knowledge and making meaning (Gordon, 2019). Dialoguing with peers and engaging in critical inquiry had a positive impact on students and student learning. The dialoguing that students do in the classroom matters. Gordon (2019) advocated that student voice must be privileged and listened to in the classroom. Within the traditional classroom, the dynamic still functions like the "banking model of education" as articulated by Freire (1990). Given that a deficit mindset of rurality can

negatively impact rural adolescent students' perception of their abilities and the possibilities for their future (Corbett, 2007), a shift to the dialogic classroom (Fecho, 2011a, 2011b; Stewart, 2010) in which students are agents of their own learning (Fecho et al, 2021).

Teachers and Students as Collaborators in the Classroom

As a rural educator and as a researcher concerned with issues of equitability within rural education, I believe that supporting rural students begins in the classroom. Students need to know that what they think, what they have to say, and what they believe matters in the classroom because all of these facets are a part of who they are as people. Collaborating with students as they take on the role of critical agents (Gordon, 2019; hooks, 1994) is a means of supporting students in the learning process. Rather than be passive spectators (Freire, 1990), students become active participants through critical thinking and dialogue (Fecho, 2011a, 2011b; Stewart, 2010). This differentiation between students being passive spectators and active participants is key. Including and supporting students in the learning process (Fecho et al., 2021) is key for all learners, regardless of locale. I think this move to become active participants is meaningful when thinking about rural students in particular because rural students are uniquely situated by a combination of factors, from the deficit mindset of rurality to the challenges and successes of rural schools, to be impacted by their rural place (Azano & Biddle, 2019).

Student Voices Shape and are Shaped by Meaning-Making

Knowing the deficit mindset of rurality that can negatively impact rural students' perceptions of their rural place, their rural school, and their prospects and abilities as rural students (Azano & Biddle, 2019; Biddle & Azano, 2016; Theobald & Wood, 2010), I

believe that prioritizing student voices in the classroom is essential. Student voice is the articulation of the lived experiences, beliefs, and ideas of a student. While that articulation in the classroom may not be audibly voiced via classroom talk or verbal dialogue, it can be expressed through writing, projects, and other types of assessments, be they formal or informal. Student voice in the rural classroom is important because the articulation of lived experiences, held beliefs, and formed ideas by students in the space of the classroom, with the audience of their peers and teachers, has the potential to be affirming to students, their peers, and their teachers.

Student Ownership and Student Voice

I believe there is an act of ownership that can happen when a student shares their voice in the dialogic classroom (Fecho, 2011a, 2011b; Stewart, 2010) that is learning centered (Fecho et al., 2021). Learners have chosen to share—be it through classroom talk, an essay response, small group discussions, or a project constructed—an expression of themselves. The articulation of themselves can serve as an act of ownership in that what is expressed is part of their identity as a rural adolescent. Additionally, the act of listening to the student voices of peers can potentially create a space that rural students view as being a space that accepts and affirms their rural identities. The articulation of student voice in the classroom can lead to greater student autonomy because of the empowerment that can come from drawing upon their lived experiences as they make meaning with the content of the classroom. Knowing the deficit mindset that can negatively impact the identities of rural adolescent students, the development of student autonomy in the classroom through the support of student voice is key.

Student Voice and Student Autonomy

As I consider the importance of student autonomy and its connection to student voice in the classroom, I look to the work of Hardré and Reeve (2003) who examined the importance of student autonomy and the ways in which the moves of teachers in the classroom can help foster it. I see student autonomy as a positive result of the support of student voices in the classroom. For Hardré and Reeve (2003), student autonomy can be supported in the rural classroom through a classroom environment where teachers "offer their students choices and options, respect students' agendas, acknowledge their feelings and questions, and offer learning activities relevant to students' goals and aspirations" (p. 355). Student autonomy is fostered through providing opportunities for students to be independent in the classroom, such as through student choice in activities, as well as through creating space for students to be co-collaborators in the classroom. Such a classroom privileges the beliefs, choices, and feelings of students.

In a space that may not typically privilege students as autonomous, I see this type of co-collaborating classroom as being incredibly beneficial to rural students as they form their identity. The moves made in the classroom to support student autonomy are intentional instructional moves made by the instructor (Hardré & Reeve, 2003).

The Classroom Teacher and Student Voice

Azano (2011) expanded upon Hardré and Reeve (2003), explaining that while there are extraneous elements that impact rural teachers, i.e., limited funding and geographic distance, the classroom environment is within the teacher's control.

Teachers' Experience of Place and Connecting with Students. Azano (2011) found that the teacher's experience of place was important. For "Mr. Schaffer," he

viewed his sense of place and his students' sense of place as "similar" in terms of community, geography, norms, and familial importance. Mr. Schaffer's perception of students' place was defined by aspects of his own experience of rural, such as his value systems that were not necessarily those of his students. I view this as an example of another way in which teachers impact the space of the rural classroom. As articulated by Hardré and Reeve (2003), student autonomy is built in part by student connection. Are the values of the student supported? Is the material congruent with their goals and aspirations? I believe that teachers must be mindful to tend to their systems of belief in the classroom as it potentially factors into how they seek to make connections with students. Attending to biases regarding belief systems and concepts of place will be important for rural teachers seeking to support student voices and student autonomy in the classroom.

Using Teacher's Sense of Place in the Classroom. A sense of place means that one holds a variety of identifiable spaces from the span of our lives (Hutchinson, 2004). In Azano (2011), the teacher participant, Mr. Schaffer, identified strongly, from birth, with Blue Valley, frequently referring to the town as home. He sought to expand upon the shared "sense of place" by including placed-centered stories in his lessons. Using place was of value to Mr. Schaffer because he viewed the students and himself as products of their place and because his students had limited life experiences. Mr. Schaffer's sense of place is part of his identity and informed his instructional moves in the class, including how he sought to connect with students. I see this as important in two ways. First, Mr. Schaffer serves as an example of the importance of identity in relation to rurality. His place – a rural place – has positively impacted his self-concept. Second, Mr. Schaffer's

concept of place informed how he relates to his students from the position of rurality. My question becomes, how are students impacted when the concept of place held by the teacher is incongruous with the concept of place held by students?

How Teachers' Sense of Place Can Impact Students. Azano (2011) found in the study that the use of place by the teacher served as a means of activating the prior knowledge of students. For example, one of Mr. Schaffer's students, Nicole, said that the teacher's personal reflections on Blue Valley is useful because it helps her relate and connect. Mr. Shaffer's intentionality of connecting texts with place-based examples for students impacted Nicole's understanding of the material. Using place as a consistent reference point in the classroom served as an aide for activating student prior knowledge. Using place in the classroom can serve as a means of supporting students in the rural classroom. If teachers are able to connect with students via a common sense of place and community, teachers can potentially create space for the lived experiences of students. I see using place as another way to support student autonomy in the classroom.

For Gruenewald (2008), a critical pedagogy of place is a meld of critical pedagogy and place-placed based education, which "emphasizes the spatial aspects of social experience." (p. 308). A critical pedagogy of place requires reflection, for teachers, on the intertwined relationship that exists between where one lives and the education establishments one supports. Where one lives and how they function in space, effectively *makes* a person.

Countering the Deficit Narrative of Place with a Critical Pedagogy of Place

I believe that a critical pedagogy of place can counter the deficit mindset of rurality, which often negatively impacts rural students. By engaging in a curriculum that

includes a space for rurality in the classroom, rurality can be viewed as worthy of study and critique. Additionally, critique of rurality is crucial for students in order to understand their community and identity in relation to place. School can serve as a means of advancing the value of community in the form of place-based education (Waller & Barrentine, 2015). By utilizing place, teachers can seek to better understand, engage, and support students as they navigate the affordances and restraints of rurality (Corbett, 2020).

Challenges With Student Voice. In my work, I am concerned with the challenges and successes in the ways in which rural teachers seek to support the voices of rural adolescent students in the English language arts classroom. An imperative facet of supporting student voices is student engagement. Students who do not feel engaged in the curriculum will be reluctant participants. I look at the work of Hendrickson (2012).

Within a working-class population of white students, Hendrickson's (2012) study looked at the reasons given by rural Appalachian students as to their hesitancy towards school engagement. The study used classroom observations, and students who displayed "resistant behaviors" were chosen for interviews (p. 37). Student lack of engagement and potential misunderstandings with teachers can arise when students do not find or perceive the importance of the school-sanctioned education. Though society typically values those individuals that offer critiques of society and push the status quo—their efforts are positive and impactful—students resisting mandated schooling are not viewed in the same positive way. Students who demonstrate their school disassociation via acts of resistance in school can often face consequences for their actions when those actions are deemed as misconduct by school administrators, potentially characterizing the student by

the perceived misconduct. The disciplinary actions further the inequalities that can be experienced by resistant students that are at the root of their disconnect with school.

Teacher Intentionality. Engaging students in the curriculum of the classroom takes intentionality on the part of the instructor. Engaging students can occur through the use of place in the classroom (Azano, 2011) and a learning-centered pedagogical stance (Fecho, et al., 2021). If students' voices are privileged in the classroom with students acting as collaborators, student autonomy is supported. If students are supported in the classroom and feel that their beliefs and experiences are valued, they will feel that they are active agents within the classroom space.

Student Autonomy Through Student Opportunities

Student autonomy is further supported through providing students with choices, opportunities, and agency within the classroom. In addition, the use of place in the classroom can serve as a means of connecting the lived experiences of students with the content of the classroom (Azano, 2011). However, teachers must be mindful to tend to differences between their held concepts of place and those of their students (Azano, 2011). Rather than relying on an idealized view of place, a critique of place can be a powerful tool in engaging students and countering the deficit view of rurality that relies on stereotypes and narrow concepts of place (Azano, 2011; Azano & Biddle, 2019). In creating a space for the lived experiences of rural adolescent students in the classroom, students will be affirmed in their own rural experiences and will be able to see other concepts of place.

Summary

When considering place-based pedagogies within the context of rural schools, I

am reminded that just because a student lives in a rural area and attends a rural school, it does not necessarily mean that the student has a positive connection to their locale. Students may have complex relationships with their locale. Teaching in a small community, I taught students who openly expressed frustrations about rural living. I remember "Mattie," whose family moved from California when she was in elementary school, who never felt a connection to "the country," despite doing very well in school and having a supportive group of friends. Mattie covered her desk with maps of Paris, Tokyo, and London. She often talked about her plans for the future, plans that would not include Polk County or anywhere within the continent. I also think to students who had idealized views of Polk County. I think to "Annie" who grew up in an isolated section of the county in the valley. She adored her community. Annie frequently expressed her desire to go to college for her elementary degree so that she could return to her valley community to teach at the same elementary school she attended. Annie did just that and flourishes as a teacher who seeks to connect with her students. Thinking of Annie and Mattie, I am reminded of the nuances of rural communities and students' relationships to their community.

Adolescence is a complex time of identity development. Rural students, as explained by Theobald and Wood (2010), are influenced by their rurality in the formation of their identity. Often, there is a deficit mindset of rurality, within and outside of rural communities, which can negatively alter the narrative of what it means to be rural and what rural people can accomplish. This is further complicated by the lack of attention to rurality within the traditional classroom (Azano, 2011; Azano & Biddle, 2019) and the lack of student autonomy within the traditional classroom (Freire, 1990). However, in

using socio-cultural theory (Freeman et al., 2007; Wells, 1999)), constructs of rurality (Azano, 2011; Azano & Biddle, 2019; Corbett, 2007; Gruenewald, 2008), critical literacy (Freire, 1990, 2018; Gee, 1990), and learning-centered pedagogy (Fecho et al., 2021) to examine the ways in which rural English language arts teachers can draw upon the lived experiences of rural students in the classroom, I hope to develop insights into the ways that teachers navigate opportunities and challenges in rural schools.

Jensen (2004) wrote about asking students to perform miracles in their lives – asking them to walk on water and to write about those acts. In order to perform these miracles, be they removing oneself from a bad relationship or acknowledging a health struggle, students had to keep their focus on themselves and believe in themselves. The acts were the stuff of courage, started by a belief in self and supported by their classroom community. A laser-focus on the teacher was not needed for the miracles to occur. In the midst of the rhetoric about rural deficits and narratives of loss, it is easy to see the rural teacher as a savior figure. Rural students do not need classroom teachers to speak for them or carry them across the water. Rather, I propose that what is needed in rural education is a pedagogy of humanity, where teachers view their students as individuals endowed with unique possibilities. The job of the rural teacher is to support students as students use their lived experiences to inform their understanding of the content of the classroom and the content of the world around them.

Chapter 3: Methodology and Methods

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative study is to use a sociocultural, anti-deficit, and dialogic rural theoretical framework to provide a lens for examining how the context of rurality influence teachers' pedagogical practices and rural students' lived experiences in the secondary English language arts classroom. In this chapter, I will detail the methods used to generate and analyze data regarding teacher's instructional practices in the rural English classroom as they support rural adolescent voices through a learner-centered pedagogical stance (Fecho et al, 2021).

Methodology

As researchers, we can make intentional instructional decisions that honor the work of teachers in their context and locale. These intentional instructional decisions mean using methodology that seeks to better understand experiences of teachers within the specific context of rural schools as they seek to support rural students. The stories of teachers, as told by teachers, are key to understanding narratives of rural education. Stories are how we, as humans, understand the world around us, how we chronicle life events, and how we negotiate experiences. *Who influenced you regarding....? What happened when ...? When did you know that...? How did you feel after...?* In other words, *tell me a story*. I think about my time as a high school teacher in a rural school. With each year, with each semester, with each class, I gathered stories. Stories were how I learned about my students. I had a massive comfy armchair by my desk that ended up being an ideal spot for students who would wander into my classroom, plop into the chair, heave a troubled sigh, and tell me what was on their mind. *Tell me about it.* In other words, tell

me *your* story. Through the stories of my students, I was able to develop a better, though never complete, understanding of them and their lived experiences. During my comfy chair talks, I learned about what I might not know about while walking around my classroom. I learned about the night job stocking shelves "Grayson" had to take in order to help his grandmother keep their house after his grandfather died; that was why Grayson was falling asleep in class. I learned "Pamela" had to find, organize, and complete the citizenship paperwork for her entire family; she was afraid of getting something wrong. I learned the stories of my students and those stories were crucial in contextualizing my understanding of my students as people. By seeking to understand my students as people, as individuals with beliefs, convictions, histories, senses of place, and goals, I was able to better assist them, teach them, and learn with them.

I think that a similar dynamic can hold true when education researchers seek to understand and work with teachers. As researchers, we need to seek the stories of teachers and we need to always be viewing teachers as people. They are individuals who are using their professional experience, beliefs, convictions, personal histories, and senses of place to inform their classroom practices. Each class, along with what the teacher brings into the classroom from their own background, comes from the backgrounds of each student, combining for a specific context of that class. That contextualization of the teacher, students, and overall class is important to consider when seeking to better understand the stories of teachers, how they seek to support students, and how students use their stories in the classroom. I believe that as an education researcher, in order to gain insight into the rural classroom and honor the work of rural teachers, I needed to seek to better understand their contextualized stories. Seeking the stories of rural teachers

as well as observing their interactions with students in the classroom can assist in shifting the narrative from a deficit mindset narrative to one that privileges the efforts of rural teachers to support their students.

Learning About Place Through Story

Humans are drawn in by stories as a means of sharing experiences (Bruner, 1991, 2002; Weaver-Hightower, 2019). We can never truly walk in someone else's shoes, but we can seek to honor the experiences of others through creating space for others' stories to be told and listening to their stories (Bruner, 1991, 2002; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Mishler, 1999). Telling stories is inherently a fluid experience as stories are modified as they are retold, relived, revaluated, and reflected upon (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). In this way, storytelling is "a meaning-making process" (p. 1). To understand teachers and value their work in the classroom, a qualitative approach pursuing the stories of participants was optimal. A qualitative approach can help create a snapshot, in detail, the contextualized experience of an individual (Maxwell, 2013; Weaver-Hightower, 2019).

In thinking about ways in which to understand the experiences of rural teachers in the classroom as they seek to support the lived experiences of rural students, rurality was part of the context to explore and consider (Azano, 2011; Corbett, 2007; Donehower et al., 2007; Gruenewald, 2008). Each teacher was an individual, working in specific schools, teaching in specific classes filled with students who are each an individual with their own lived experiences of rurality (Azano, 2011; Azano et al., 2021; Corbett, 2020). I wanted to be able to have an in-depth understanding of how rural teachers support the voices of rural students. A qualitative study assisted me, as an education researcher, in developing a nuanced understanding of teachers' instructional practices.

Approaching participants as individuals who are part of larger social systems, such as schools, was useful especially as I was concerned with contextualization for rural teachers and rural students. As I sought to gain a better understanding of the narratives of rural teachers, it was crucial that I remembered that they are individuals who, as teachers, were part of a district, a school, and a classroom, all of which were part of a rural community. According to Theobald and Wood (2010), rurality is a factor in identity formation for those from rural places. As people, we are influenced by and informed by the places in which we live and work; for teachers, those experiences are inside and outside of the classroom. Therefore, if I wanted to honor the lived experiences of rural teachers, I had to be intentional in seeking to include the larger context of rurality, including the social systems teachers are involved in. These social systems were crucial to consider because of how those spheres of community and subsequent systems within the community impact teachers' experiences of rurality in their daily lives.

Honoring the experiences of rural teachers meant honoring their work inside and outside of the classroom. Throughout my research, I was intentional about my methodology and methods in order to be aware of my biases and assumptions about rurality, open to discoveries, and able to value the work of rural teachers. Endeavoring to honor the work of teachers at rural schools, a qualitative approach created a process for hearing the stories of teachers in rural communities in their own words. Additionally, I wanted to support the work of rural teachers through data generation via classroom observations, teacher interviews, field notes, lesson plans, and email correspondences. With each facet of data generation, a larger, more nuanced picture of the experiences of rural teachers and their efforts to support rural students informed my research.

Methods

In this section, I will describe the methods and tools used in the study to better understand the ways in which English teachers seek to support the voices of rural adolescent students in the rural secondary English classroom through learning-centered pedagogy (Fecho et al., 2021).

Participant Selection

I wanted to better understand rural English language arts teachers' efforts in supporting student voices and see the ways in which student voice becomes evident as a result. In order to study the efforts of rural English language arts teachers as they seek to support the voices of rural adolescent students in the classroom, I selected participants for this qualitative study using purposeful sampling. Using purposeful sampling provides insight into the lived experiences being studied (Patton, 2015). I acknowledge that the research relationship established with participants can "facilitate or hinder" other research design factors (Maxwell, 2013, p. 66). Therefore, I wanted to be mindful through my interactions and work with the participants of potential perceived hierarchies and asymmetrical relationships (Mishler, 1986).

Participant Criteria

I looked for three to five teacher participants who met the following criteria. In conducting purposeful sampling, I could ensure that the chosen participants in the study would represent the population in question and thus be more likely to offer insight into the lived experiences of secondary English language arts teachers in rural North Carolina.

1. Participants must be employed as an English language arts teacher at a rural (Azano et al., 2021b; Corbett, 2020; Rasheed, 2020) secondary school (grades 9-12).
2. Participants must have been teaching for a minimum of three years.
3. Participants must self-identify with a learning-centered (Fecho et al., 2021) approach to teaching.

Participant Criteria 1. For the participant selection criteria, teacher participants must have worked in a rural school and taught secondary (grades 9-12) English language arts. I did not make it a part of the purposeful selection requirements that participants identify as rural for two reasons. First, it is possible that teachers reside in a community that is not the one that they teach in. Though the community they teach in might be rural, that does not mean that said community resided in by the participant is the same or is also rural. Secondly, though a participant is employed in a rural community that does not mean that the participant identifies as rural. There was intentionally nothing in the selection criteria that required participants to identify as being rural as the definition of rural place can fluid and can be characterized in different ways in terms of identity (Azano et al., 2021b; Corbett, 2020). There were no criteria in the participant selection regarding the grade level or courses taught within the parameters of secondary English.

Participant Criteria 2. In order to find participants that did not have the possible challenges of early career teachers, such as classroom management or curriculum development, I sought participants who had been teaching for at least three years. I do not assume that early career teachers are less capable of supporting students' voices and enacting learning-centered (Fecho et al., 2021) pedagogy, but I am mindful of the

challenges often accompanying adjusting to being in the classroom in regards to balancing demands.

Participant Criteria 3. It was important that the participants self-identify with a learner-centered approach to teaching. If the teacher participant holds a pedagogical belief system that is learning-centered (Fecho, et al., 2021), then their instructional moves in the classroom will align with supporting student voices.

Rationale for Rural Locations

As previously established in previous chapters of this study, the definition of rural is one that is not entirely fixed. According to Corbett (2020), rurality, rather than being static, is fluid and changing. Two counties were designated to be part of the study: Northern County and Western County, both located in North Carolina. Northern County and Western County are rural counties, both of which count for part of the eighty out of one hundred counties in North Carolina that are classified as rural (NC Rural Center, n.d.). For Western County, there are two high schools in the county: Mountain View Early College High School and Bethem High School. Students from across the entire county are able to attend either high school. Within Northern County, Foothills Early College High School can be attended by students from across the entire county, although there are several other high schools across the county.

Recruitment

A recruitment email was sent to selected potential participants to gauge their interest in participating in the study. Designated school principals were contacted via email to secure their permission to conduct research in the schools, and were asked to

supply permission via a letter on school letterhead. Once permission was obtained, potential teacher participants were contacted via email.

Participants were not asked to sign an informed consent form in order to participate in the study. Participants were asked to review an informed consent form (see Appendix C). Participants were under no obligation to remain in the study if they chose to withdraw. There were no perceived risks. As described in the subsections below, I employed a three-stage data generation process (see Table 1), which included an adaptation of the three-phase interview approach (Sediman, 1990).

Participant Profiles

Throughout the study, participants are referred to by pseudonyms chosen by the participants. All counties associated with participants and school names are pseudonyms, as well.

Participant 1: Kerri Ives. Participant 1 was Kerri Ives. Kerri had been teaching for nine years in North Carolina and all nine years have been spent at Foothills Early College High School in Northern County. She previously taught for a time in rural Kenya.

During the course of the data collection, Foothills transitioned from a hybrid model for instruction (i.e., where students attend school two to three days a week and were completing online course work the remainder of the week) to in-person instruction (i.e., attending traditional in-person classes) instruction for students after the school's scheduled spring break. With the hybrid model, Kerri taught eight sections of English 10 and a section of a county appreciation seminar course at Foothills. With the start of in-person learning, Kerri's course load of English 10 courses was then limited to four

courses. The school only offers two English classes through their high school program: English 9 and English 10. The subsequent English classes that students take are via the community college (i.e., college-level English courses). Though she lived and taught in the rural community of her school, Kerri was raised in and attended university in large urban areas. During her time in Northern County, Kerri has been intentional about being involved in local politics, leading community efforts, and better understanding her town.

Kerri became a teacher specifically because she wanted to help students and support them in building more confidence in their English skills (and developing English-related skills needed in other areas of life). Additionally, Kerri wanted to work with students "that needed a little bit more love and attention" and those were, for Kerri, "more rural students." (Participant 1, Stage 1, Intake Interview). She decided to work at Foothills because of their mission and vision for education in a rural area.

Participant 2: Catherine West. Participant 2 was Catherine West. Catherine had been teaching for 15 years during which she taught a wide range of classes: ESL to all ages (elementary school ESL up through adult ESL), middle school English for grades 7 and 8, and high school English for grades 9, 10, 11, and 12. On the community college level, Catherine previously taught composition courses, literature courses, and adult education courses.

At the start of the study, Catherine was in the middle of her third year teaching at Mountain View Early College High School. During the course of the study, Catherine taught one section of honors English 10 and then two sections of college American Literature II, which covers American literature from 1865 to present. Throughout the 2020-2021 school year, Mountain View conducted their courses in-person, though

students at the option to be remote learners (i.e., students complete courses online, attending select courses via Zoom asynchronously). As a result, Catherine had two to three students that were remote in addition to her students that were in-person.

Previously, Catherine taught in Charlotte, North Carolina and in rural Iowa. Though not from a rural area, Catherine intentionally moved to Western County with her family to be closer to her parents. Catherine expressed some difficulty for her family living in a rural community, especially given her Italian husband's city roots. She expressed that there were times when her family did not feel as though they fit into the Western County community.

Participant 3: Caroline O'Neil. Participant 3 was Caroline O'Neil. Caroline had been teaching English for 20 years, all at Bethem High School in Western County, though she was not originally from the area. When Caroline was 14, her family moved from the West End of London to a small town in South Carolina. When she was a young mother, she moved to Western County because she thought it would be an ideal place to raise a family. Caroline expressed identifying as an immigrant, often speaking on the prejudice she experienced immigrating as a young teenager, such as being teased or excluded because of her accent.

During the course of the study, Caroline taught two sections of English 11 and one section of English 12. At the beginning of the study, Bethem conducted classes on a hybrid model. In the latter part of the spring semester, courses transitioned from a hybrid model (i.e., students attended classes two days a week and worked remotely two days a week) to an in-person model (i.e., students attended traditional in-person classes four

days a week). The school maintained the option for students to continue the semester remotely.

Though not originally from Western County, Caroline articulated being dedicated to being part of the community and its young people. She particularly identified with the Mexican community in Western County.

Three Phase Interview Process

I adapted the accepted qualitative practice of using a three-phase interview approach (Seidman, 1991). My adaptive approach (see Table 1) used an initial interview, three post-observation conferences, and a final interview. The goal of this adaptive approach was to contextualize a person's lived experience, which is key to understanding behavior (Seidman, 1991). Without contextualization, the exploration of experiences is difficult to comprehend and unpack (Patton, 1990).

In Seidman's (1991) three-phase interview setup, the first interview is used to contextualize the experiences of the participant via asking the participant to discuss themselves through the topic up to the present. Experiences are reconstructed in detail in order to construct a life history. *How* questions rather than *why questions* invite the participant to use the context of their lives in reconstructing events related to the questions asked (Seidman, 1991). The second interview focused on the "concrete details" of the participants' present experiences in regards to the area being studied (Seidman, 1991, p. 11). The third interview focused on the meaning of the participants' experiences. The previous focus on past experiences and exploration of current experiences can support participants in making meaning with the context of their experiences in relation to the lived experiences being studied. The third interview cannot be constructive if the

first two interview phases were not successful in setting up a foundation (Seidman, 1991).

Rather than exclusively following the three-phase interview approach presented by Seidman (1991), I opted for an adaptive three-interview approach. In Table 1, I have named the three interview phases described by Seidman (1991) and have explained how each has been used and adapted for this qualitative study. The first and final interviews were used as outlined by Seidman. However, rather than conducting a single midpoint interview, I wanted to structure the main time frame of the study to facilitate three midpoint interviews with each of the participants. These three rounds of sessions allowed for more time to interview, collaborate with, and observe the participants because each interview was preceded by a co-planning session and classroom observation. Next, I will explain the purposes of each interview phase as used in this qualitative study.

Table 1. Adapted Three-Phase Interview Approach

Interview Phase 1	Intake Interview	Phase One of the interview process consists of an initial intake interview with each participant. The intake interview lasts an estimated 60 minutes.
Interview Phase 2	Midpoint Interview	Phase Two of the interview process consists of three separate post-classroom observation interviews with each participant. The post-observation interviews last an estimated 60 minutes each.
Interview Phase 3	Final Interview	Phase Three of the interview process consists of a final interview following the completion of all co-planning sessions, classroom observations, and post-observation interviews. The final interview lasts an estimated 60 minutes.

The first phase of the study included an initial intake interview with each of the participants about the teachers' philosophical and pedagogical orientation in regards to student-centered teaching. Following the initial intake interview, the second phase served as an adapted midpoint interview. Rather than one midpoint interview, each of the teacher participants took part in three rounds of sessions that each included a co-planning session, a classroom observation, and a post-observation conference. In the three co-planning sessions, I co-planned three student-centered lessons with the classroom teacher, adapting lessons to support student voice. The three classroom observations utilized an observation protocol to document the co-planned lesson and prepare for the post-observation conference. After each of the three observations, was a post-observation conference used to discuss the challenges and successes of that lesson. Phase three consisted of a final interview in which I explored the participants' experiences in all three previous classroom observations of the co-planned lessons.

Three Stages of Data Generation

Table 2 (see below) summarizes the three stages of data generation I carried out in this study. The first stage of the data generation process was an initial interview with each of the teacher participants. This initial interview served as an intake interview. Lasting 60 minutes, I used the intake interview to learn about the teacher participants' pedagogical stance, concepts of student voice, and rurality. The second stage of the data generation process consisted of three co-planning sessions, three classroom observations, and three post-observation conferences for each of the teacher participants. The third stage of the data generation process was the final interview, which was completed with each of the teacher participants. The final interview was designed to be a space that allows the

teacher participants to reflect on the experience of taking part in the study. Teacher participants were asked about the process, their teaching experiences, and feelings about student voice in relation to supporting rural students.

I followed the Virginia Tech policies for conducting in-person research that were in place at the time of the study, adhering to any and all of the local guidelines and policies for face-to-face contact related to COVID-19. Due to COVID-19 protocols, all activities were conducted remotely via Zoom. With the participant's permission, interviews, planning sessions, and post-observations conducted via Zoom were audio recorded. As soon as sessions were transcribed, the audio was deleted. Classroom observations were conducted remotely via Zoom due to Virginia Tech, state, and local COVID-19 protocols. There were no audio or video recordings of the classroom observations, however, I took field notes during any virtual observations that were focused on the participants (teachers only) during the class periods observed.

Table 2. Adapted Three-Phase Interview Process Timeline

Stage 1: One Session		
Stage 1, Session 1: Intake Interview	60 min.	P1, 12 February P2, 17 February P3, 24 February
Stage 2: Nine Sessions		
Stage 2, Round 1, Session 1: Co-Planning	30 min.	P1, 19 February P2, 22 February P3, 17 March
Stage 2, Round 1, Session 2: Classroom Observation	75 min.	P1, 22 February P2, 22 February P3, 17 March
Stage 2, Round 1, Session 3: Post-Observation	45 min.	P1, 23 March

		P2, 23 February P3, 18 March
Stage 2, Round 2, Session 4: Co-Planning	30 min.	P1, 16 April P2, 12 March P3, 22 April
Stage 2, Round 2, Session 5: Classroom Observation	75 min.	P1, 20 April P2, 12 March P3, 22 April
Stage 2, Round 2, Session 6: Post-Observation	45 min.	P1, 20 April P2, 18 March P3, 22 April
Stage 2, Round 3, Session 7: Co-Planning	30 min.	P1, 27 April P2, 22 April P3, 29 April
Stage 2, Round 3, Session 8: Classroom Observation	75 min.	P1, 29 April P2, 22 April P3, 29 April
Stage 2, Round 3, Session 9: Post-Observation	45 min.	P1, 29 April P2, 23 April P3, 29 April
Stage 3: One Session		
Stage 3, Session 1: Final Interview	60 min.	P1, 30 April P2, 11 May P3, 5 May

Data Sources

In my qualitative study, I used triangulation through multiple data sources in order to learn about participants' experiences supporting the voices of rural adolescent students in the secondary English language arts classroom. Triangulation serves as a means of "establishing structural corroboration" (Guba & Lincoln, 1981); structural corroboration through triangulation can strengthen validity (Eisner, 1979; Guba & Lincoln, 1981). Triangulation brings credibility to both data and findings (Webb et al.,

1966). Though triangulation requires the researcher to be familiar with the data in order to know what data to discount (Denzin, 1971), data triangulation allows for the use of multiple data sources with different participants, observations, and situations (Denzin, 1970). Due to the ease of integrating triangulated data into research, triangulation is deemed a solid choice for validity examination (Weaver-Hightower, 2019). For my data sources, I used teacher interviews, collaborative lesson planning, classroom observations, post-observation conferences, field notes, memos, and email correspondences. In the following subsections, I will explain each of the data sources in more detail.

Teacher Interviews

Each of the three interviews were semi-structured interviews (Merriam, 1998) to be conducted with the classroom teachers. These interviews were designed to elicit narratives and stories (Mishler 1986; Mishler 1999) of the teaching and learning experiences in each class planned and observed. The narratives of the participants are identity narratives and were influenced by their perceived social position (Mishler, 1999). Therefore, I was mindful of the need to honor the work of the participants through seeking their stories via open questioning in all interactions. The first interview with the teacher was conducted as an intake interview (see Appendix A). I interviewed participants in the intake interview in order to learn about their pedagogical beliefs regarding student voice and the learning-centered classroom. I adapted the intake interview and final interview from the protocol established by Marshall (2016). Participants were interviewed again as part of the post-observation protocol in the form of a conference. There were three interviews that follow observations of the co-planned

lessons (see Appendix B). The final interview occurred at the conclusion of the study, conducted with each of the participants (see Appendix A).

Open-ended (Seidman, 1991), "tell about" prompts within the semi-structured interviews were key as those prompted narratives from the participants. I wanted to facilitate an atmosphere in our interview and conference meetings in which the teacher participants felt and knew that they were respected as educators and individuals. The stories told by the teacher participants were a means of better understanding (Bruner, 1991, 2002; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Mishler, 1999; Weaver-Hightower, 2019) the instructional moves of rural teachers as they navigate the challenges and opportunities of the rural classroom.

Lesson Plan Development

I worked with the classroom teachers in order to help develop lesson plans that were learning-centered and that sought to support the voices of rural adolescent students in the secondary English language arts classroom. My goal was for these lesson-planning sessions to be a collaboration that utilized the teacher participants' knowledge of their discipline, students, and community. Three co-planning sessions took place with each of the teacher participants. Each of the three co-planning sessions focused on ways in which student voice could be supported through learning-centered pedagogy in the classroom. I did not anticipate that participants would need to build new lessons based on student voice. Rather, I anticipated that participants would be able to adapt existing lessons through the co-planning sessions, implementing additional instructional strategies that would support learning.

Classroom Observations

Following a protocol adapted from the Middle and Secondary English Education program at the Virginia Tech School of Education (Virginia Tech School of Education, 2020), I conducted classroom observations following co-planning lessons (see Appendix B). Each teacher participant took part in three classroom observations. I anticipated that there would be around two-weeks between the planning session and the classroom observation. Classroom observations lasted the entire class period, approximately 90 minutes each. The observation protocol documented basic information such as the teacher participant, school, grade level, number of students in the class, lesson topic, position in an overall unit. The use of learning-centered pedagogy and the ways in which the teacher participants support student voice were documented. The observation protocols were used to help facilitate the post-observation conference. Table 3 shows the classroom lessons, and their greater units, observed from each participant.

Table 3. Lessons Observed

Participant 1 Lesson Plans: Kerri Ives Foothills Early College High School; Northern County
Lesson Observation 1 Course: English 10 (1st period) Unit: *The Great Gatsby* Lesson: Chapter 2 of *The Great Gatsby* Activities: Metaphor Activity Review, Discussion of Chapter 2's Apartment Scene
Course: English 10 (1st period) Unit: *The Great Gatsby* Lesson: Chapter 6 of *The Great Gatsby* Activities: Resource Challenge
Course: English 10 (1st period) Unit: *The Great Gatsby* Lesson: Chapter 7 of *The Great Gatsby* Activities: Three-Note Card Activity; Class Discussion of Myrtle's Death

Participant 2 Lesson Plans: Catherine West (Mountain View Early College High School; Western County
Course: English 10 (2nd period) Unit: *Things Fall Apart* Lesson: Chapters 20 and 21 Activities: Student Presentation on Chapters
Course: English 10 (2nd period) Unit: Magical Realism and Latin America Lesson: Gabriel Garcia Marquez Activities: Project Demonstration; Review of Readings
Course: English 10 (2nd period) Unit: *A Doll's House* Lesson: Introduction to Ibsen and *A Doll's House* Activities: Review of Completed Web Quest; Anticipation Guide
Participant 3 Lesson Plans: Caroline O'Neil Bethem High School; Western County
Course: English 11 (1st period) Unit: *Roots* Lesson: "We Wear the Masks" Activities: Grammar Activity; Reading of "We Wear the Masks"; Class Discussion
Course: English 11 (1st period) Unit: Research Paper Lesson: One-on-One Conferences Activities: Grammar Activity; One-on-One Conferences
Course: English 11 (4th period) Unit: Research Paper Lesson: Speech Introductions Activities: Grammar Activity; Index Card Speech Introduction Activity. Timing Speeches

Field Notes and Logs

Complete and accurate field notes of participant observations were a goal, as field notes would serve as a source of data (Bogdan & Taylor, 1975). The use of field notes to capture social dynamics and interactions were key to the study (Emerson et al., 2011). Field notes were recorded not only during formal observations but also following causal

interactions and dialogues. Observation and field notes were utilized to better understand the connections and divergences between a teacher's pedagogical goals and practices. As commentary from the research observer is crucial in field notes, field note commentary included my reactions, first impressions, and any evolving hypotheses (Merriam, 1998). I included direct quotations when I was able in my field notes.

My research goal in this qualitative study is to support the work of rural teachers and rural students. As such, I wanted to give a detailed and correct account of my observations within the rural classroom as complete and accurate field notes of participant observation should be the goal of the researcher as field notes serve as data (Bogdan & Taylor, 1975). In addition to completing field notes after each observation period, "casual" occurrences of interaction, such as email correspondences, were recorded in field notes (p. 60). Given the various phases of coding used during data analysis, detailed field notes regarding interviews and classroom observations supported and provided reliability to the analysis and subsequent findings.

Within the field notes of classroom observations, in accordance with established IRB protocols, I documented salient statements from students. Students were never recorded via audio or video. Only pseudonyms were used in reference to any student responses depicted in this paper. No identifiable notes were taken in regards to students.

Memos

I expanded my field notes into the form of daily memos. According to Emerson et al., (2011), the process of writing is required to move analysis forward and solidify ideas. In-process memos were used to further develop ideas, concepts, and analysis. In-process memos expand upon field notes via analytical writing. Conducting memos from my

recorded field notes after interviews, observations, conferences, and interactions allowed me to think beyond my notes and consider audience and potential analysis (Emerson et al., 2011).

Email Correspondences

Emails exchanged between participants and I throughout the course of the study were included as data. In addition to regular email correspondence regarding meeting times and scheduling, I found that participants would contact me between observations. The correspondences were never regarding planning or procedures, but rather they were about events or occurrences in their classroom they were excited about or they thought I would find interesting given my study. I included such emails as part of my data analysis because they gave nuanced insight into the moves and efforts of classroom teachers and the ways in which they seek to support students.

Analysis Across Data Sources

During all interviews and classroom observations, field notes were created and those field notes were expanded into logs. Data came from the semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, field notes, memos, classroom teachers' lesson plans, and email correspondences with participants. For the data analysis, thematic content analysis was used (Maxwell, 2013) to generate themes based on the constructs of student voice and learning-centered pedagogy (Fecho et al., 2021). As it is a "way of seeing" (Boyatzis, 1998, p. 1), I used thematic analysis in order to identify meaningful units of data in regards to the lived experiences being studied (Maxwell, 2013).

Listening served as a key step in the data analysis process (Maxwell, 2013). Listening to the transcripts removed from transcribing allowed space for me to begin

thinking about the data in light of the theoretical frameworks used in this qualitative study: the social constructs of rurality (Azano, 2011; Azano & Biddle, 2019; Corbett, 2007; Gruenewald, 2008), critical literacy (Freire, 1990, 2018; Gee, 1990), and learning-centered pedagogy (Fecho et al., 2021). Transcripts were created from audio tapings of the intake interviews, co-planning sessions, post-observation conferences, and final interview. All transcripts and field notes from each stage of the three stages of data generation were printed out and arranged in chronological order for each participant. When all the interviews were transcribed, I read all transcripts from interviews, observations, and conferences, as well as all protocols and field notes composed during the data collection process multiple times to ensure that I was familiar with the texts. Multiple readings assisted in thinking about participant tone, general ideas discussed, and my initial response to the interviews (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Memos were created from field notes as a means of conducting additional analysis from initial notes; writing memos during the initial analysis process helped to keep track of my thought process as I analyzed the data (Maxwell, 2013; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

Coding

Throughout each stage of the data collection process in this qualitative study, I generated a coding dictionary that was adjusted and expanded upon with each stage. Initial themes were generated in light of interviews and observations, and those were further refined in light of the creation of transcriptions, expanded observations, and clarification of data sources through the lens of the theoretical framework established in Chapter 1 (Boyatzis, 1998). The creation of codes in thinking about the data through

theoretical frameworks being utilized was important during the coding process (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). I was not utilizing a theory-driven approach as described by Boyytzis (1998), but the theoretical frameworks of the qualitative study did help to guide my analysis through initial coding to the final coding table.

Initial codes were written out. I noted when words, descriptions, ideas appeared multiple times within the data (Boyytzis, 1998). Themes were generated from the initial codes (Boyytzis, 1998; Maxwell, 2013). With each round of coding, the codes were clarified and collapsed in accordance with their corresponding theme. Upon revisiting initial codes, codes were further collapsed in order to maintain meaning (Maxwell, 2013).

Table 4 shows the final coding table used for the data analysis. The three themes were: (1) meaning-making with the curriculum, (2) the affordances and constraints of place, (3) cultivating of a classroom environment, and (4) the evidence of student voices in the classroom.

Table 4. Coding Dictionary

Theme	Definition	Code	Definition
Meaning-Making with the Curriculum	Indications of opportunities for students to connect with the content of the classroom curriculum.	Student Connections to Curriculum	Opportunities for students to make meaning with the content of the curriculum.
		Instruction Design to Support Learning	Efforts of the classroom teacher to support students in meaning-making through instructional design.

The Affordances and Constraints of Place	Indications of the affordances and constraints of place for students, teachers, and community culture.	Tension Between School and Rural	Indications of teachers' efforts to tend to possible tension between cultures.
		Celebrating Rural Literacies	Indications of teachers' efforts to acknowledge and celebrate student literacies, especially rural literacies.
		Attending to Rural Stereotypes and Deficit Mindsets	Indications of the teacher to tend to stereotypes and deficit mindsets of rurality.
Cultivating Classroom Environment	Indications of the efforts of teachers to cultivate a classroom environment that supports students and learning.	Learning-Centered Goals of Classroom Teachers	Indications of the efforts of teachers to enact learning-centered goals in the classroom curriculum.
		Dialogue Between Teachers and Students	Indications of dialogue occurring between teachers and students.
		Classroom as Place	Indications of the classroom serving as place for students, specifically as a place that feels supported.
Evidence of Student Voice in the Classroom	Indications of student voice being articulated and supported in the classroom.	Teachers Learning from Students	Indications of teachers articulating insights, knowledge, and ideas gained from student voice.
		Efforts to Engage Student Voice	Indications of teachers' seeking to engage student voices in the classroom.

		Place-Specific Voices	Evidence of student voice in the classroom that is place-specific.

Subjectivities

Throughout the previous chapters, I have sought to be open about my lived experiences as a rural resident and as a rural researcher, as well as how these held identities and spaces have shaped me. According to Cheater (1987), as researchers, we cannot remove ourselves from the subjectivities that we hold; we should not ignore them but pay attention to them with intentionality. Peshkin (1988) asserted that rather than dispelling or seeking to eliminate subjectivities, qualitative researchers should work within their positionality.

Having grown-up and having attended school in a rural community, I identify as being rural. For me, being rural means being part of a safe and small community that is fairly removed from urban centers. I acknowledge that my positive experiences growing-up rural is in many ways dictated by my being raised in a white middle-class household. As a cis-normative heterosexual female in a middle-class family, my experience of rural was one of privilege. Though I did not personally experience hardships often associated with rural areas, such as racism, substance abuse, and poverty, I am aware of their potential impact on rural people. I saw glimpses of these hardships in the lives of friends, students, and community members: hearing “Ms. Wright, guys that look like us don’t go there. We’ll get shot.” from my Black students, seeing the Section Eight housing complex behind the school filled with hard-working families, attending funerals of victims of

overdose from all different generations, and hiding donated "weekend" bags of food from the local ministry under the desks of students.

Peshkin (1988) described subjectivity as a "garment that cannot be removed" rather than something that is earned or can be removed whenever the need arises (p. 17). I recognize that I am unable to bracket (Vagle, 2009) my existing ideas, concepts, and beliefs regarding the lived experiences being studied. Instead of trying to achieve some sort of objectivity, I intend to let those subjectivities inform my work. As Vagle (2009) has suggested, I will bridle them and use them not as a hindrance, but as a source of knowledge and critical thought. My existing belief systems and preconceptions about rurality can serve as a guide as I conduct my study. I must be aware of those existing systems. I cannot willfully ignore that I hold biases towards rurality as a rural person, rural teacher, and rural researcher. As articulated by Freeman et al. (2007), the notion of "pure" data is a fallacy; no data is pure due to the subjectivity and lived experiences of the researcher. Instead of seeking to dispel subjectivity, researchers can use their positionality in order to aid the research at hand (Freeman et al., 2007; Peshkin, 1988).

If I, a rural resident and researcher, seek to produce rather than give meaning in my rural-based study, I must lean into my subjectivity, using it as a resource rather than a hindrance (Peshkin, 1988; Vagle, 2009). As someone who identifies as rural and as someone who does rural research, I am concerned about the potential tension between my lived experience and my interpretation and analysis of collected data. I am specifically thinking about the ways in which my experiences might move or might limit my analysis and judgment, for instance regarding deficit mindsets of rurality, stereotype threat (Azano et al., 2021a), and views of rurality that are set up as or are conditioned by binaries. My goal is not to shy away from reducing or avoiding stereotypes regarding rurality, because

when we do not talk about things, we give power to the problems that are there. Rather, I seek to lean into those spaces of rurality that are potentially uncomfortable or seemingly problematic.

In leaning into those spaces, I want to dig into the nuances that exist. Rather than seeking to see binaries, I want to see stereotypes as a means of understanding rurality. Rural should not be seen only within a binary-based space predicated upon what is good or what is bad, as is the condition of existing within a binary structure. We need to work within a pedagogy of place that values embracing lived experiences rather than being confined by binary thinking. What I propose is an intentional move towards seeking to find similarities and lived experiences that bridge perceived differences. In seeking the lived experiences of groups, we are looking at understanding and appreciation rather than seeking differences. In this way, we view people as what they are: human. We will see others as humans with unique lived experiences and voices.

In the Holocaust children's story, *Greater Than Angels* (Matas, 1998), the narrator quotes her father: "That we are all shards of light and that in each of us is a spark of the divine." (p. 90). I am compelled by this truth that within all of humanity there is potential and innate importance. I am not attempting to interject religion into the classroom, nor do I want to. I am too aware of the historic weaponization of religion, particularly in the Western world. I am, however, aware that my belief system in regards to my faith does have a paramount place in who I am as a teacher because of how it influences who I am as a person. I cannot separate the two. My belief that the lived experiences of individuals matters comes from a place of first valuing so completely the life of a person. Regardless of race, place, background, belief systems, gender, political

affiliation, and allegiances, all humans are created equally and their lived experiences not only shape who they are, those experiences are of immense worth and value.

Stewart and McClure (2013) discussed how students serve as powerful mentors in education, influencing our subjectivity. I think of "Sam" and her profound influence on me as a teacher and as a person. Sam had a thousand-watt smile and bouncy curls which she unconsciously pulled taut whenever she was engrossed in reading. It was not too long before I learned that Sam's smile and cheerful demeanor hid a story full of depression and drug use, but she was a fighter. The last time I saw Sam, she was in her early twenties and came by the school, wanting to showcase her new tattoo, the final line's of her favorite Robert Frost poem that we read in my class all those years before: "But I have promises to keep/ And miles to go before I sleep/ And miles to go before I sleep." She said it was a reminder in the midst of her stays in rehabilitation, that she had something to live for. It was a reminder that she had value. Sam allowed me to walk through the snowy woods with her and it forever changed me as a teacher and as a person. Rather than see a stereotype, I saw a brave, compassionate, and brilliant young woman who was trying to change her story. She had promises to keep. Even with her death this summer, it was in the midst of fighting to keep her promises.

If it is my goal to support rural educators and rural students, then I must not only value them, but amplify their stories rather than speaking for them. I do not need to speak for Sam. Her life spoke volumes for itself in the way she lived and the way she loved. Sam taught me to see people as people rather than the labels so often callously thrust upon them. I carry that mindset into my teaching and my research.

Limitations

This qualitative study was designed to study the lived experiences of secondary classroom teachers as they seek to support the voices of rural students. In using multiple data sources and in striving to honor the work of rural teachers through their stories, I hope the project offers a nuanced understanding of the efforts of said teachers. However, there are anticipated limitations to the study. Because the study was asking teacher participants to utilize pedagogical methods with which they may not be familiar, teacher participants may struggle with implementation. It is possible that not all teacher participants will perceive themselves to be well versed in classroom instruction that supports student voice, which could impact the instructional implementation in the observed classroom lesson. I am also aware of the fact that my presence in the classroom had the potential to impact the teacher participant and students as I was not a regular figure or participant in the space. As my study examined human experiences through interviews that seek to better understand the stories (Mishler, 1986; Mishler, 1999) of teacher participants, conceptual inferences (Stewart, 2011) could be impactful in the presentation of data. Though some may contend that conceptual inferences can serve as a limitation because they are not generalizations. However, from my established theoretical framework, conceptual inferences will not serve as a limitation due to their lack of generalizability because my goal is not to generalize but is to produce research that allows individuals to make conceptual inferences.

Chapter 4: Understandings

Introduction

This qualitative study examined the ways in which rural English language arts teachers sought to support the voices of rural adolescent students in the secondary classroom. In order to develop insights into the ways that rural English language arts teachers navigate opportunities and challenges in contemporary rural schools, the study utilized a sociocultural, anti-deficit, and dialogic rural theoretical framework, guided by the constructs of rurality (Azano, 2011; Azano & Biddle, 2019; Corbett, 2007; Gruenewald, 2008), critical literacy (Freire, 1990, 2018; Gee, 1990), and learning-centered pedagogy (Fecho et al., 2021). These constructs informed the study's theoretical framework, as detailed in chapter 1, as well as the methodology used, as detailed in chapter three.

My analysis of the data generated three key areas of developed understanding. First, when participants designed and implemented instruction focused on making student voice a key driver in meaning-making in the rural classroom, participants felt more successful in helping students dialogue about lived experiences. Secondly, participants

could aid in their navigation of rural specific tensions through intentionally attending to potential biases and seeking to dialogue with students. The third understanding generated was that utilizing the lived experiences of their students, such as rural literacies and place-based connections, participants could support students' meaning-making with the content of the classroom.

The classroom and schooling can often result from the apprenticeship model of education where classroom teachers employ the practices that they saw their previous teachers and mentors implement (Lortie, 1975). As seen with the banking model of education (Freire, 1990), education can perpetuate systems of thinking that decentralize power from students (Azano & Biddle, 2019). Teachers remain the keeper of the knowledge and students serve as depositories (Freire, 1990) and that action is not regulated to the twentieth century classroom. Under the guise of conversation and classroom discussion, teachers can still be the driving force in the classroom rather than the students (Freire, 1990) because student voices are not being invited into the classroom (Gordon, 2019). However, if the rural English language arts classroom is truly going to be a place that values the voices and lived experiences of students, teachers must be mindful of the ways in which traditional hierarchies can influence their classroom (Bourdieu, 1986; Nieto, 2002). By seeking to foster a learning centered classroom (Fecho et al., 2021), teachers can work towards dismantling existing hierarchies, including the contributions of students and positions teachers as fellow learners.

Participants could learn, dialogue, and work in transaction with students when they privilege student experiences, dispelling with traditional hierarchies that do not consider student voice (Fecho et al., 2021). Such moves required intentionality on the

part of the participants but resulted in helping teachers feel more confident in creating space for students to utilize unique lived experiences. Each of these three understandings speak to the larger issue of hierarchies that are embedded in the traditional classroom and moves that teachers can make in the classroom to dismantle said hierarchies and create a more democratic classroom (Fecho et al, 2021). Attending to traditional hierarchies and biases that may exist in their classrooms, rural English language arts teachers can create positive environments in which students feel supported and valued.

Understandings

Throughout this qualitative research project, my focus has been on utilizing stories as a means of better understanding the efforts of rural teachers in the English language arts classroom. Though I speak of understandings, what they really are, at the heart of things, are stories. In the following sections, I will describe the three understandings generated in the data analysis, understandings that came through participants' stories. All three understandings, when present in the rural classroom, rural English language arts teachers can create classroom environments that serve as a supportive place for rural adolescent students.

Understanding 1: Supporting Student Voice Through Design

Drawing upon students' connections to identifying as having Cherokee heritage and the connections of those with family farmland, Caroline asked students, "Are we connected to our history regardless of whether we were there or not?" (Participant 3, Stage 2, Round 1, Observation Field Notes, 18 March). The responses from students, who were reading Alex Haley's *Roots*, were powerful. One student said there could still be handed-down trauma present. Another remarked how traumatizing it would have been to

leave the land you and your family had always lived on. With emotion, the student expressed, “I would have hated to live in the mountains for my entire life and been forced to move.” (Participant 3, Stage 2, Round 1, Observation Field Notes, 18 March). A final student echoed their peer about the power of land in one’s family history, later talking about how much their family’s farmland meant to them, how it was part of their identity. Caroline was excited and moved by her students’ expressed connections to a text that might typically feel distant to a majority white class.

The first understanding focused on participants’ use of instructional design implementation in the rural classroom. When participants designed and implemented instruction focused on making student voice a key driver in meaning-making in the rural English language arts classroom, participants felt more confident helping students dialogue about their lived experiences in the classroom. In the above vignette, Caroline had been concerned with helping her students connect with the idea of passed-down histories in *Roots*. However, through intentional classroom dialogue that Caroline structured in her lesson plan, Caroline’s students had a space to draw upon their lived experiences and connections to their rural place. When Caroline heard the connections students were making, she was excited and more confident in thinking about upcoming lessons and how best to support her students (Participant 3, Stage 2, Round 1, Observation Field Notes, 18 March). In other words, intentionally creating a platform for student voices helped participants in their efforts to support rural students in the English language arts classroom.

Studies have shown that standardized curriculums frequently do not consider the rural experience in its creation (Azano & Biddle, 2019; Azano et al., 2021b; Edmondson

& Butler, 2010). Within the initial interviews, participants (Participant 1, Stage 1, Intake Interview; Participant 2, Stage 1, Intake Interview; Participant 3, Stage 1, Intake Interview) were asked about the ways in which they sought to support their rural students in making meaning with the curriculum. Across the data set, participants made statements regarding their efforts, subsequent challenges, and successes in seeking to support students through intentional use of instructional design. These statements made by participants, as well as instructional moves in lessons observed, demonstrated the efforts of rural teachers to support students through instructional design.

Student Connections to Curriculum

The data suggests that through the implementation of curriculum design to support students, participants felt more confident in helping students utilize their lived experiences in the English language arts classroom. The connections made from unique lived experiences to the curriculum of the English language arts classroom do not have to be specifically place-based (Azano, 2011; Corbett, 2007; Edmondson & Butler, 2010) connections, though that can be a meaningful area to draw from for rural students. Connections made by students in the pursuit of meaning-making are relevant, important, and crucial regardless of location.

One example from the data set came from Catherine as the class began a new unit on Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*. Students completed a Web Quest assignment on Ibsen's Norway prior to class and then Catherine led students in an anticipation guide on gender dynamics (Participant 2, Stage 2, Round 3, Co-Planning). Regarding the anticipation guide, students appeared excited to articulate their thoughts, most notably with the statements that were predicated on traditional, heteronormative views of

marriage. It is important to note the students in Catherine's class appeared to be accustomed to participating in class discussions and were very comfortable expressing differing opinions to their peers. Two statements in particular gave way to interesting student comments: "Men marry women like their moms" and "Most women want to marry men similar to their fathers." (Participant 2, Stage 2, Round 3, Co-Planning). To the latter question, a student quickly responded, "Guys, promise me if I ever get in a relationship with a man like my dad, kill me." (Participant 2, Stage 2, Round 3, Observation Field Notes, 22 April). A second student responded to the proposed statements: "If my dad doesn't disapprove of the guy, then it's not worth it." (Participant 2, Stage 2, Round 3, Observation Field Notes, 22 April). A third student expressed a differing opinion to his peers, both female, suggesting that people "gravitate towards what is familiar." (Participant 2, Stage 2, Round 3, Observation Field Notes, 22 April). The third student's opinion was met with further dialogue as many articulated they had not considered that idea before then and appreciated his input.

Though the class had not begun talking about *A Doll's House* yet, the anticipation guide and dialogue served as a means of getting the conversation started and helping students make connections to the upcoming text. With students openly dialoguing about gender roles in the classroom during the lesson, Catherine was given an indication that they were making connections (Participant 2, Stage 3, Round 3, Co-Planning; Post-Observation). In talking to Catherine, she expressed concern about helping students connect with a time period and a place that is so seemingly foreign as Ibsen's nineteenth century Norway (Participant 2, Stage 2, Round 3, Co-Planning; Post-Observation). She did not want students to be intimidated by the material or for them to possibly feel it was

a time and place they were unable to connect to. Catherine's subsequent instructional design and implementation were intentional to mitigate that concern.

These instructional moves were made intentionally by Catherine in order to best support students with a text that might seem distant to them. By a text being distant to students, I mean that a text might be about a topic that might be unfamiliar to them in terms of time periods and cultures that are far removed from their experience (i.e., the pre-depression era opulence in *The Great Gatsby* or the warrior culture of ancient Britain in *Beowulf*), and characters that might be difficult to connect with due to their motivations (i.e., the status climbing Lady Macbeth in *Macbeth* who will seemingly stop at nothing to gain the throne). Catherine helped their students connect with texts that might normally be difficult to connect with by creating opportunities to connect with universal themes. When Catherine and I met over Zoom for the last interview, students had finished reading *A Doll's House*, Catherine re-emphasized her earlier assertion that she thought activities, such as the Web Quest, were important in supporting students as they engaged in a text that was a product of a different time and place.

> … Just exploring those ideas, realizing okay there's a different country. All the things you try to teach about theme, you know? That's the whole reason why there are themes because they're still relevant today no matter where you are. I guess that's the good thing about teaching World Literature… (Participant 2, Stage 3, Final Interview)

Catherine explained further that part of the "good thing" about teaching the World Literature (English 10) course is that that can frame the texts and contexts to students as "Well they're a completely different culture but..." or "they're still living similar lives to

people here and today everywhere, wherever you are." (Participant 2, Stage 3, Final Interview). For Catherine, the cross-cultural content of English 10 could be a way of helping students see differences and similarities as they sought to make meaning with the texts.

Catherine spoke specifically about the connection students can make regarding universal themes that exist in the text. As seen in the classroom observations (Participant 2, Stage 2, Round 3, Observation Field Notes, 22 April), students were verbally making connections to the concepts of traditional roles that would be featured in the upcoming play using their lived experiences. Catherine saw and heard the connections her students were making in class through both tasks related to the class study. These incidences encouraged the belief in Catherine that her students were making connections that would help them along in reading *A Doll's House*. Catherine intentionally sought to implement instructional design in her classroom within which she could gauge her students' interaction with the text. In doing this, Catherine created for herself a built-in assessment with which she could adjusts accordingly. Catherine intentionally used the Web Quest and anticipation guide in order to "help them understand social aspects" of the play and to assist with "contextualizing" (Participant 2, Stage 2, Round 3, Co-Planning).

It is important to note here that *A Doll's House* is a play that deals with gender dynamics and societal expectations. Catherine, through previous conversations with her students, knew that at least four students in her class came from divorced homes (Participant 2, Stage 2, Round 3, Co-Planning). Coming from divorced homes, combined with the often-traditional views of marriage that can stereotypically arise in a "Bible Belt" community in the South. The content of the students' rural place was important for

the Catherine to consider (Cherkowski & Schnellert, 2017). There are layers to consider as a rural English language arts teacher who is concerned with students making connections: What are the gender expectations in Ibsen's Norway? What are the gender expectations presented in the play? What are the gender expectations that students experience and do those align or conflict with the larger norm in their community? Any one aspect of this is complicated, let alone when put all together. What Catherine did was consider how complicated the combination of gender expectations and norms for Ibsen's Norwegian time period, the text of the play, contemporary society, and personal experience. For adolescent students who are likely negotiating and trying to discern their identity and beliefs (Lewis & Petrone; Theobald & Wood, 2010), such layering in the classroom is important as it can ease the whole class, including the participant, into the topic.

Catherine's efforts to help students connect with the material of the classroom with their own unique lived experiences was predicated on their responses to an anticipation guide designed to lead into the class study of *A Doll's House*. While Catherine was specifically seeking to draw upon the opinions and lived experiences of her students to help them connect with the text, Kerri, in one class, relied on creating a shared experience in the classroom in order to prompt students to make connections with their participation with the interactive small group activity. The in-class experience as a means of connecting with the curriculum provides the unique opportunity to have individual experiences and a class-wide experience as texts to be examined.

Upon reading chapter 6 of *The Great Gatsby*, Kerri's class participated in a "resource challenge" (Participant 1, Stage 2, Round 2, Co-Planning; Participant 1, Stage

2, Round 2, Observation Field Notes, 20 April) where students worked in small groups with resources provided to them, such as various types of paper, paperclips, scissors, and glue sticks. Though the materials provided for each group are different, all groups must complete the same construction tasks. Kerri assured me that if groups worked together and shared resources, it was possible for all teams to complete every task given (Participant 1, Stage 2, Round 2, Co-Planning). In the classroom observation, I observed groups that had more resources in their given packets that were hurriedly working through the assignment. However, I saw the group with the least resources get frustrated at their lot, with one group member even resorting to "stealing" resources from other groups (Participant 1, Stage 2, Round 2, Observation Field Notes, 20 April). I observed students active in the task, concentrating on the best strategies, and some students were competitive, determined to finish first. Students, who did not perceive their groups able to be successful with their limited resources, were visibly frustrated. I observed one student throw his hands up in surrender as his group members continued with the assignment (Participant 1, Stage 2, Round 2, Observation Field Notes, 20 April). Although all of the class was participating in the experience, each student was having a different, unique experience based on their group, folder, and responses.

In order to learn more about the students' experiences and to be able to help make connections (Stewart, et al., 2019) to the upcoming chapter in *The Great Gatsby*, Kerri made sure that there was built-in time following the main activity in order to have students dialogue and debrief about their experiences. Kerri asked students following the resource challenge if they felt like anyone had betrayed them during the course of the activity. Kerri explained in the post-observation interview that in a previous class, two

close friends felt significantly betrayed by the other due to unwillingness to freely share resources throughout the activity (Participant 1, Stage 2, Round 2, Post-Observation).

Students were asked if they did anything they might not normally do because they felt desperate. In addition to the student who stole from another group, a student explained that he traded his card keys for a piece of white paper, one of the most valuable resources in the challenge (Participant 1, Stage 2, Round 2, Observation Field Notes, 20 April). The conversation of what one does when they feel desperate or threatened was established at the end of the lesson. "Don" explained that he temporarily gave up his car keys in order to obtain white paper, to which Kerri responded, "That's intense," and then offered a further insight to the class, "Basically, Don felt desperate." (Participant 1, Stage 2, Round 2, Observation Field Notes, 20 April). The insight from Kerri, prompted by Don's story, created space for students to share when they felt desperate in the activity. "Lizzy" said rather than feeling desperate, she felt "scrappy" because of the uncharacteristic things she did to obtain the resources she wanted, such as stealing from peers (Participant 1, Stage 2, Round 2, Observation Field Notes, 20 April).

Kerri sought to draw upon the lived experiences (Stewart, 2010) of her students when she followed up with asking students to considered times in the lives when they felt desperate. Though no students shared in that moment, the prompt served as a means to introduce a connection to the book. For example, Tom would have been provided with the best or most resource-filled folder. Gatsby might have held one of the lesser folders, such as the one full of paperclip, filled with a resource that was deemed less valuable than others (Participant 1, Stage 2, Round 2, Observation Field Notes, 20 April). Kerri explained prior that this question regarding feeling desperate was to help setup students

to the larger dynamic students would see playing out in the lives of the characters in *The Great Gatsby* (Participant 1, Stage 2, Round 2, Co-Planning). Characters such as Gatsby and George, when put in desperate situations, will do things that are out of their character. When those topics come up in class, Kerri and her students will be able to reference the shared experiences of the resource challenge.

Kerri's instructional design crafted a shared greater experience for students, one that would provide unique individual experiences for students as they worked from their given folders. For Kerri, the time to reflect at the end of the activity was key as students parsed out the feelings they experienced during the challenge. The challenged served as a lived experience that students could draw upon when applying the economic ideas to *The Great Gatsby* and constructs of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Gee, 1989; Nieto, 2002). The fact that the whole class was participating in the activity works in Kerri's favor as she can refer to the class period and activity when the need arises, allowing for some commonality even if individual experiences differed.

Instructional Design to Support Learning

Catherine and Kerri, in the previously described efforts to support students in making connections to the material, were intentionally implementing instructional design. Their efforts were planned in order to create space for students. Throughout the data set, including data within co-planning sessions and classroom observations, there were various types of instructional design implemented by the participants to engage students in the classroom and support students' learning. The use of instructional design is important to consider because it suggests intentionality on the part of the participant as they consider how best to help students.

Caroline was intent on making certain I was able to observe her one-on-one writing conferences with students. From our very first conversation (Participant 3, Stage 1, Intake Interview), Caroline discussed with great enthusiasm the one-on-one conferences she often utilized in her classroom as a means of supporting students through the writing process (Participant 3, Stage 2, Round 2 Co-Planning, Observation, Post-Observation; Participant 3, Stage 2, Round 3 Co-Planning; Observation; Post-Observation). Caroline said of her use of one-on-one conferencing: "I just feel very strongly about it. And the kids really like it, they really do, and then it makes them in turn feel comfortable to come and show me the minute I have insisted that they come to my desk." (Participant 1, Stage 1, Intake Interview). One remark that Caroline made regarding one-on-one conferencing with papers stuck out to me in a powerful way from the intake interview. She said "We don't work on our writing in isolation" and that serves as a mantra in her classes. Whether it is a small paragraph at the beginning of the semester or a larger piece of writing in the latter part of the year, she intentionally made time to work one-on-one with students (Participant 1, Stage 1, Intake Interview).

Caroline's one-on-one students conferences occurred during the class period and she noted that the students have already had several class periods with one-on-one conferences throughout the semester. Caroline expressed that she utilized the conference approach to work shopping in her classroom for several season. For Caroline, the one-on-one conferences served as a means of giving automatic feedback to students as well as creating space for dialogue between herself and the student (Fecho 2011a, 2011b; Fecho et al., 2021; Stewart 2010).

> …I have found that they like the attention because I feel like a lot of times when you have a class of thirty students, they don't… they *crave* that teacher attention and even the ones that are disappearing into the wall and I always feel guilty about that. Everyone is included everyone gets to have a little bit of the teacher. (Participant 3, Stage 2, Round 2, Post-Observation)

In the one-on-one conferences, I did not observe Caroline working with students from a "this is right" or "this is wrong" standpoint. The conferences were a place for students and Caroline to ask questions, seek clarity, and dialogue about the topics at hand. Caroline worked with "Annie" whose paper was on incidences of sexual assault on women (Participant 3, Stage 2, Round 2, Observation, 22 April). Annie, according to Caroline, was quiet and reserved, yet she was willing to speak more during the conferences (Participant 3, Stage 2, Round 2, Post- Observation). Caroline asked Annie open-ended questions to prompt her to further elaborate on her project, such as asking "What do you think women do or need to do?" or asking her thoughts on current norms (Participant 3, Stage 2, Round 2, Observation, 22 April). Caroline perceived that Annie felt more comfortable with her paper after their conversation and Caroline appeared more confident that she had been able to support Annie (Participant 3, Stage 2, Round 2, Post-Observation).

Caroline's efforts to support students through instructional design took place through her supporting students in the writing process. Caroline knew that since many of her students could potentially get frustrated with the paper writing process, the conferences could be check-ins and a time for focused work. Additionally, with the

observation taking place towards the end of April, many students were, according to Caroline, “burned out” (Participant 3, Stage 2, Round 2, Post- Observation). There was never any time limit to the conferences or minimum requirement. Due to the fact students participated in the conferences before, I did not observe student being uncomfortable with their interaction with Caroline. Caroline sought out to do build one-on-one conferences into the structure of not just the lesson but of her entire semester-long class because it created structured time in class that could normalize students work shopping their work, asking questions, defending their ideas, growing as writers.

Caroline’s use of one-on-one conferencing is an example of Caroline’s goal of teaching from a learning-centered stance (Fecho et al., 2021). Caroline utilized the one-on-one conferencing in such a way that she could support students throughout a larger project and throughout their writing assignments for the duration of the class. Because working one-on-one was normalized, by that I mean routine, in the classroom, Caroline explained that the dynamic made it more typical for students to come to her with questions, concerns, and assistance (Participant 3, Stage 1, Intake Interview). In this capacity, Caroline is not the holder of knowledge, but rather a support system for students. For Caroline, she was learning along with her students with learning being an evolving process (Fecho et al., 2021; Fecho & Botzakis, 2007).

Caroline was aware of how students can become intimidated by writing assignments and so she implemented instructional designed that had students working alongside her, working through their writing together. While Caroline’s instructional design occurred within the classroom, in one particular example, Kerri utilized instructional design through a homework assignment that was used to support students in

their class readings. Kerri articulated her concern that often students can be intimidated by a text like F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* because of the 1920s context that can easily feel removed from their experiences. These videos and subsequent review assignments served as a means for Kerri to support students by packaging needed historic information into small chunks. While not giving students an exhaustive review of the time period, the homework served as an additional support.

Regarding the importance of making connections in *The Great Gatsby*, Kerri said, that even though the characters are "horrible people," that "if they [students] can understand like their own American Dream and connect it to the fact we're all trying to do something and we're all trying to get somewhere" then she has been successful in her instructional moves (Participant 1, Stage 1, Intake Interview). For Kerri, the goal is for students to be able to say: "I can see myself in the same struggle as this character" and then when that happen, "it makes whatever poem you're reading or book you're reading more relatable." (Participant 1, Stage 1, Intake Interview). Kerri intentional moves with her instructional design helped her feel more confident that students were making the connections to help further their understanding of the classroom material. With each assignment, Kerri directly connected the content to that of the corresponding classroom lesson.

Kerri carried this same mindset of a learning-centered classroom into her efforts to support students that may not have completed class readings or may not feel confident in their understanding of the readings. According to Kerri, many students do not fully complete the required readings and may decide not to complete the Google Form homework assignment for *The Great Gatsby*. To accommodate these possibilities, Kerri

included a review activity as the beginning of all of her lessons. Within the second class observed (Participant 1, Stage 2, Round 2, Observation, 20 April), students were to come to class having read Chapter 6, which tells the true background of Gatsby. Kerri acknowledged that this information and the timeline could be confusing (Participant 1, Stage 2, Round 2, Co-Planning). Working in pairs at the start of class, Kerri had students use their texts to arrange strips of paper with Gatsby's life events in order (Participant 1, Stage 2, Round 2, Observation, 20 April). The activity served as a review for those that read Chapter 6 and felt confident, helped to support those that read but may feel unsure, and provided a space built into the lesson for students who had not read the chapter.

For Kerri, the review activities were a way to continue supporting students. If a student had not read, she did not want them to feel like they were being punished or for them to feel like they were further behind. Kerri, as a teacher concerned with teaching from a learning-centered stance, desired for her students to feel confident.

> …I know that a lot of them did not actually open their book. So I feel like part of that is like maybe not student voice but student confidence. Like even if they didn't read at home, I know that when they came to class, they opened up the chapter they were supposed to read and like looked at the pages maybe for a minute when they were organizing the strips. They at least starred at the bits of Gatsby's life. They've at least opened up the pages of the party. Those are like the big things we need to get from Chapter 6. (Participant 1, Stage 2, Round 2, Post-Observation)

Kerri, in addition to wanting students to be confident about the material, also wanted to students to be treated with respect. Kerri further clarified that, "So maybe that's not them

sharing their experience but that's like giving them the abilities to move forward with the book." (Participant 1, Stage 2, Round 2, Post-Observation). Respecting students meant not shamming them for not having read. From our first interview (Participant 1, Stage 1, Intake Interview), Kerri expressed her desire to support students and make sure her honored their lived experiences inside and outside of the classroom. Kerri's efforts concerning intentionality and instructional design are evidence of a learning-centered classroom that supports students (Fecho et al., 2021).

Understanding 2: Attending to Biases and Seeking Dialogue

It seems unlikely that a teacher would learn a great deal about their student from a question about teeth, but that was what happened to Catherine. One day, a student came up to Catherine and asked if it was normal that he, as a teenager, still did not have any adult teeth. What occupied his mouth were rows of baby teeth. It was not something he had spoken to his parents or guardian about, but wanted to know what Catherine thought. Catherine, taken aback, told him that he should go talk to the nurse about it that day. The student agreed that it was a good idea to seek medical advice and went back to his assignment. Having worked in rural, suburban, and urban communities, Catherine spoke about the similarities in communities and how challenges could look different but come from similar roots. Catherine reflected on the interaction with her rural student, in thinking about rural communities specifically, "Sometimes you don't really *know* about what goes on until you hear things that happen" and that rural students are often "good at either not letting it affect them or just wanting to be like everyone else" (Participant 2, Stage 1, Intake Interview). Catherine's student's teeth likely told a larger story, be that a lack of recommended nutrition or infrequent dental care. Without the unexpected

question voiced by a student, Catherine might not have been privileged to that chapter of her student's story. With that chapter, Catherine became aware of a rural tension experienced by her student who wanted to be like his peers (Participant 2, Stage 1, Intake Interview).

The second understanding that came about through my data generation and analysis involved teachers tending to rural biases (Azano et al., 2021b; Azano & Biddle, 2019; Carr & Kefalas, 2009; Corbett, 2007) and rural stereotypes (Gurley, 2015; Reynolds, 2017a; Theobald, 1997). Participants can aid in their navigation of rural specific tensions through intentionally tending to potential biases and seeking to dialogue with students (Fecho, 2011a, 2011b; Fecho et al., 2021; Stewart 2011). As seen with Catherine's interaction with her student regarding his teeth, she learned something about her student that would lead to a better understanding of the ways in which to lend support (Participant 2, Stage 1, Intake Interview).

I perceived that Kerri, Catherine, and Caroline each demonstrated differing stances on the influence of rurality (Cherkowski & Schnellert, 2017) within their classrooms. By the influence of rurality within their classrooms, I mean the ways in which participants address rurality in the classroom, such as using local-based examples, or the ways in which participants discuss the rural challenges and opportunities (Azano & Biddle, 2019) that exist within their communities. Notably, all three participants were not originally from the rural community in which they currently reside and teach, and none are from rural areas. However, at the time of the study, all three lived within the rural community in which they taught. Small communities are credited with aiding rural teachers in developing "familiarity" (Azano et al., 2021b, p. 7) that can aid in relationship

building with students and community members (Ulferts, 2016). Kerri, Catherine, and Caroline were intentional in getting to know their students, and particularly for Kerri, getting to know the rural community. Even in being relational, tensions and biases can still be present. For example, Caroline had to attend to her stance against guns while working with a student on a pro-gun paper (Participant 3, Stage 2, Round 2, Observation, 22 April). Attending to these biases through dismantling the traditional hierarchies of the classroom, as well as leaning into tensions through transactional dialogue (Fecho et al, 2021), teachers can work towards supporting students.

Teachers Learning from Students

Across the data set, participants demonstrated and expressed a willingness and desire to learn from students in the classroom (Fecho et al., 2021). In actively seeking student voices (Gordon, 2019), teachers demonstrate an openness to attend to the existing hierarchies in the classroom and learn from students (Fecho et al., 2021). Caroline, in reflecting upon specific moments in the lessons I observed in which she felt she was successful in supporting students' voices, she referred to the first lesson observed (Participant 3, Stage 2, Round 1, Observation Field Notes, 18 March). In that lesson, students read the poem "We Wear the Masks" in light of their primary novel *Roots,* and shared about times in which they felt or feel that they have to wear masks. Caroline described the response written by "Darlene." Darlene's response was notable in that she told a personal story that truly gave a glimpse into a truly difficult situation she found herself in. I am not suggesting that Darlene's response was more notable due to her personal struggles, but I am offering that Darlene's story that she chose to share with Caroline served as a means of inviting Caroline to know more about her (Participant 3,

Stage 2, Round 1, Observation Field Notes, 18 March). I perceive that to compose one's story into words, knowing that it will be read by a teacher that has shown her interest and compassion from the way in which she presents herself, is an act of wanting to be known.

During a whole-class conversation regarding masks, Darlene expressed that she had to wear a mask, or "conform" to family ideals, at home, because her religious family did not accept her identifying as LGBTQ+ (Participant 3, Stage 2, Round 1, Observation Field Notes, 18 March). In her writing submitted to Caroline, Darlene expanded upon her verbal dialogue in the classroom conversation, explaining that her family rejects the fact that she has a girlfriend and due to her family's conservative beliefs, she actively cannot be her true self and must wear a mask while at home. Caroline, in recounting the lesson and Darlene's writing, was still visibly moved by Darlene's connection to the poem, but was also concerned about the circumstances her student was navigating (Participant 3, Stage 3, Final Interview). However, Caroline expressed gratitude for becoming aware of Darlene's circumstances.

> She's struggling. She's struggling now. So she's come to me – she in fact did not do her paper. And so now what's happened is she's been away from school but I know she's been watching her siblings and she came to me, and asked to talk to me, and she was crying and apologetic about what was happening but it was her home life, she's having mental health issues. And because of that activity, I suppose, I kind of already had the background story. (Participant 3, Stage 3, Final Interview)

In her response in the final interview, Caroline referred to the "paper" which was the research paper that students worked on in two of the classroom observations

(Participant 3, Stage 2, Round 2, Observation Field Notes, 22 April; Round 3, Observation Field Notes, 29 April). Darlene had not turned the paper in and, given Darlene's decision to share her current experiences with her teacher, Caroline felt better equipped to help Darlene.

> So I definitely can support her more as a person, not necessarily in her development in English but as a person because of that activity. Knowing that about her helped me help her, support her, cut her some slack knowing what she goes through. (Participant 3, Stage 3, Final Interview)

Caroline wanted to support Darlene. The greatest task what not submitting the paper for the English course. Rather, the greatest task was Caroline making sure Darlene knew that she, as a person, mattered.

Darlene was an example of many rural adolescents who must navigate tensions in the lived experiences as they form their identity and who they want to be (Theobald & Wood, 2010). As a LGBTQ+ youth, Darlene could be marginalized or had been denied mentorship growing-up in a religious and conservative household in a rural (Azano et al., 2021b). Darlene's story was one that showed place-specific tensions, though LGBTQ+ youth face the threat of exclusion and a lack of support in other places. The rural English language arts classroom, one that is learning-centered and seeks to utilize the lived experiences of students (Fecho et al., 2021), can better support students like Darlene. When the focus is on the student and what they bring to the content, teachers will see them as humans rather than names on a roster.

Efforts to Engage Student Voice

With each of the participants, efforts to engage student voices included, though not limited to, a careful walking of the line between their personal convictions and beliefs as persons and the personal convictions and beliefs held by their students as persons. Though there was evidence numerous times congruence between the beliefs of teachers and students in all of the lessons observed with each of the three participants, there were notable situations that participants had to navigate where belief systems did not align. Participants articulated the ways in which they seek to navigate moments in the classroom in which those possible tensions arise.

Caroline discussed "Horatio," in her class who was writing his research paper against illegal immigration (Participant 3, Stage 3, Final Interview). In that same class, another student, Meme, was writing a paper advocating for immediate legal status immigrant families at the border between Texas and Mexico. Both students' families are Mexican immigrants. Caroline expressed vulnerability in working with those papers, worrying that her attitude and instruction regarding those projects may have been impacted by her convictions and personal connection to the topic. Not only does Caroline feel a distinct connection to her Mexican students, but Caroline is also an immigrant. Caroline still expressed clear emotion and anger when she told me that her father, who passed away during the data collection phase of the study, incorrectly completed the family's immigration paperwork, putting their immigration status in serious jeopardy when she was a teenager.

> I don't know if that's vulnerability or if that's a bias I have. But just from what I've been through personally when my dad screwed up the immigration process. You know, it was very hard for us and I can so

totally relate that I can't – I don't know. (Participant 3, Stage 3, Final Interview)

I was impressed with how self-reflective Caroline was about the nuanced dynamic that had transpired in her class between the two papers on immigration that were being constructed by students, her personal experience with immigration, and her current held beliefs. However, I appreciated that Caroline had hoped that such conversations, which had transpired and would possibly transpire in class via dialogue could speak to students and broaden understanding (Fecho & Botzakis, 2007).

Understanding 3: Utilizing Lived Experiences and Literacies

"Theo" was one of Kerri's students. Many teachers had been frustrated with Theo's piling class absences, including the ever-increasing piles of un-submitted work that negatively impacted Theo's course averages. Theo was spending 40 hours a week during the school year working at the town's volunteer fire department alongside his father. Week after week, Zoom classes and assignments were pushed aside for department duties and emergency calls. It was when Kerri began asking Theo about his work that she truly understood that Theo was learning lessons and showcasing literacies beyond those typically privileged in the English language arts classroom. Theo described animatedly to Kerri about the call he went on the day before, the people he helped, and the joy he had felt in serving his community. As Kerri reflected later, those are things that should be talked about more because they matter (Participant 1, Stage 1, Intake Interview).

The third understanding involved the ways in which classroom teachers seek the lived experiences of students (Fecho, 2011a, 2011b; Fecho et al., 2021; Stewart, 2011)

and draw upon student literacies, including rural literacies (Donehower, 2003; Donehower et al., 2007; Edmondson, 2003) or secondary discourses (Azano et al., 2021b). Utilizing the lived experiences of their students, such as rural literacies and place-based connections (Azano et al, 2021b; Azano & Biddle, 2019; Corbett, 2007; Gruenewald, 2008), participants could support students' meaning-making with the content of the classroom.

Dialogue Between Teaches and Students

Kerri articulated that there was tension at Foothills as students from being entirely remote in spring 2020 and some of fall 2020, to participating in a hybrid model in fall 2020 and spring 2021, to eventually attending school fully in-person towards the end of the spring semester. Due to the sudden fluidity of students' schedules in spring 2020, many students began working at local establishments or took on more hours at their current place of employment. Though students enrolled in her sections of English 10 are often limited, due to their age, as to being able to seek employment, one of the students from English 10, Theo, had become increasingly involved in the county's volunteer fire department which caused tension between that work opportunity and his assigned schoolwork.

Kerri's discussion of Theo's work at the fire department was an example of a student's secondary discourse (Azano et al., 2021b) or a rural literacy (Donehower, 2003; Donehower et al., 2007; Edmondson, 2003). Theo was learning valuable skills while at the fire department. On the surface level, he was learning crucial skills needed to help people in desperate and life-threatening situations (i.e., controlling a blaze, protecting residents, and employing first aid). On a deeper level that cannot be understated, Theo

was learning life skills that seemed beyond his years (i.e., being dedicated to a cause, exemplifying self-sacrifice, and working from a place of community citizenship). Theo's story is an example of how a rural literacy can be of equal or greater value than what is learned in traditional schooling. Theo's story is particularly powerful when thinking about how he was giving back to his rural community and how he was learning from rural community members.

Kerri described an example of her conversations with Theo, exhibiting the tension between his work at the fire department and the expectations of school. According to Kerri, Theo often states: "I can't do my schoolwork today. I'm at the fire department. I'm at the fire department. I'm at the fire department." (Participant 1, Stage 1, Intake Interview). Kerri's reply was frequently: "School is your first priority. Like you need to spend an hour just doing this." or "Can you, you know, take a break from doing calls and do this, just this one assignment?" (Participant 1, Stage 1, Intake Interview). Kerri did explain that she and other teachers allowed Theo additional time on assignments or will re-open past assignments so that he is able to continue with his schoolwork (Participant 1, Stage 1, Intake Interview).

As Kerri detailed her story of working with Theo, she demonstrated clear frustration, not with Theo but with the situation as a whole, knowing that in order to prevent Theo from getting behind in his high school courses, as well as successfully pass all his tenth grade required courses, he needed to be completing assignments and attending class. The dynamic between time at school and time at the fire department is further complicated by the perceived priorities held by the parents, "So I do stress that he still has to do schoolwork because his parents – his mom still cares that he does

schoolwork. Dad's who he's at the fire department with." (Participant 1, Stage 1, Intake Interview). There was tension between the work that Theo and his father are committed to the firehouse and the prioritizing of school that is important to Theo's mother, to Kerri, and to her colleagues at Foothills. However, the work of school and the work of the rural literacy, in the form of the fire department, can both be means of education for Theo, in different but significant ways that have value and importance.

Kerri had a nuanced understanding of her students and was intentional in the ways in which she sought to communicate with them in informal ways, such as in casual conversation. Regarding Theo, Kerri was affirming in her acknowledgement of his work at the firehouse, advocating that what he does is important and of great value. When Theo was at school, Kerri was intentional in her conversations and affirmations. Theo would tell Kerri about his work. She stated that she never said, "You shouldn't be there [the firehouse]. You should be here [school]." (Participant 1, Stage 1, Intake Interview). Instead, Kerri told Theo: "That's impressive. That's really cool. I mean that's amazing that you saved that person's life." (Participant 1, Stage 1, Intake Interview). In our conversation regarding Theo, Kerri showed with her facial expressions, voice inflections, and physical movements that she was enthusiastic and impressed with Theo's work as a firefighter: "Like that stuff has value and that's what – those are skills that he has that other people don't have and people maybe should have. That's amazing that he is, you know, running into burning buildings." (Participant 1, Stage 1, Intake Interview). Kerri expressed her acknowledgement that Theo's rural literacy demonstrated profoundly important skills that had value to his rural community because they were skills that he

used to help, assist, and sustain his rural place (Azano et al., 2021b; Donehower, 2003; Donehower et al., 2007; Edmondson, 2003).

This marked a shift in her tone regarding Theo. Earlier in the interview, it occurred to me that she might have hit a proverbial wall with the situation. This was an assumption of mine that proved incorrect. Kerri' use of "celebrate" in regards to student skills demonstrated that she sees the value in said skills. However, Kerri spoke with great enthusiasm and genuine regard towards Theo. She was proud of him, not just because of his work as a volunteer firefighter, but because he was immersed in something that he was dedicated to and something that was sustaining to his community (Azano et al., 2021b; Donehower, 2007). Rather than dismissing Theo's work as unimportant, Kerri sought out Theo's stories. Dismissing Theo's work may have been a tempting option for many educators since Theo's work in the fire department took significant time away from his school studies. Instead, Kerri switched the narrative and sought out information, inviting Theo to tell her stories about his work and creating a place for his rural literacies to be valued (Azano et al., 2021b; Donehower, 2003; Donehower et al., 2007; Edmondson, 2003).

When we seek to actively dismantle existing hierarchies in the classroom, the classroom can become a democratic space where students are seen as human. Rather than being a student with missing work, Theo was a human seeking to do good in his community. Such acknowledgment of personhood and worth speaks volumes to a person's character and perceived ability. If we graced students with such understanding, I do not think there is much they could not accomplish.

Celebrating Rural Literacies

Azano et al. (2021b) emphasized that as educators, we must seek to "*add* discourses" rather than seek to "replace or subtract" (p. 61). As rural literacies can greatly shape the identities of students, teachers should recognize the value of the rural literacies held by and demonstrated by students (Azano et al., 2021b).

Kerri articulated (Participant 1, Stage 1, Intake Interview, 12 February) the importance of being intentional about learning about students and learning new things through students, particularly regarding their rural community. For Kerri, such connections are about celebrating the literacies of students, "but I guess for me in this rural area it's about like learning new things, and then making an effort of like connection with them, and remember them and celebrate them." After this observation in the initial interview, Kerri then describes an interaction she had with a student who was an avid hunter in her classes, Ben. Kerri said of Ben and his complex process:

> … He goes off, he goes like through the whole process of like preparing the land. And then getting, you know, he has all these licenses and then he goes and hunts. And he even like makes his own deer jerky at the end – like all the way until making the jerky with the deer. (Participant 1, Stage 1, Intake Interview)

Kerri even asked Ben to try some of the homemade jerky, saying that she had "bugged him for a couple weeks" and telling him "Bring me some deer jerky! I want to try this. I want to try this. I want to try this." (Participant 1, Stage 1, Intake Interview). Kerri has thrilled when Ben brought her some jerky because it gave her space to affirm how good it was and how impressed she was with his work, even telling Ben that he should give some

to the other teachers, "Let the other teachers try this! This is so good!" (Participant 1, Stage 1, Intake Interview).

Kerri was animated throughout her story regarding Ben. She was impressed with the skills that the student demonstrated and though she never attributed "rural literacy" with Ben's hunting, such an attribute would be appropriate (Donehower, 2003; Donehower et al., 2007; Edmondson, 2003. I view Kerri' celebration of the student's literacy of hunting as particularly notable because she prefaces the story with the fact that she knows a limited amount about guns and hunting, additionally self-identifying as being anti-gun. However, Kerri invited conversation between herself and Ben, creating an intentional space for Ben to be the expert in the dialogue.

For Theo and Ben, working at the fire department and going hunting were literacies. They were skills each young man had developed and clearly demonstrated, from Kerri' depiction, proficiency. Rather than further isolating students for not fitting into a particular mold of a "successful" student, Kerri identified and verbalized the achievements of the students. In the initial intake interview (Participant 1, Stage 1, Intake Interview), Caroline talked with great passion about the Mexican students in her classes. I asked Caroline about the ways in which she seeks to support the literacies (Donehower, 2003; Donehower et al., 2007; Edmondson, 2003) and lived experiences of the Mexican students in her classes. Caroline stressed, "People don't understand that it takes five to seven years to become fluent in a language" and praised the skills of her bilingual students (Participant 1, Stage 1, Intake Interview). I think there is an incredibly powerful lesson in Kerri's moves regarding her students' literacies that she might not necessarily fully appreciate at first. In the same way, I think there is something powerful in

Caroline's impassioned acknowledgment of being bilingual as a literacy of tremendous worth. Speaking multiple languages, serving as a firefighter, and hunting are all literacies that can occur, not just in rural communities, but also across the country. Valuing them in the classroom not only values the student that demonstrates such abilities, but also honors the place from which they come.

Understandings and Creating a Positive Classroom

One of the constructs that influence this qualitative study is that of place (Azano et al., 2021b; Azano & Biddle, 2019; Corbett, 2007; Gruenewald, 2009). When I have talked about place, it has not been limited to rurality as place. Rurality is nuanced and complicated, with traditional definitions no longer being enough to organize (Azano et al, 2021b). Additional, place is fluid and changing, a means of organizing an even more nuanced concept (Corbett, 2020). Place can be the classroom environment that a teacher creates for their students. In thinking about the three understandings generated from the data analysis, it became clear that the understanding involved classroom environments and how they might impact and support students. When all three understandings listed above are being enacted in the classroom involving instructional design, supporting student voices, using a learning-centered pedagogical frame, and utilizing lived experiences, a positive place can be created. By attending to the traditional hierarchies that may exist in their classrooms, participants could create a positive environment in which students feel supported and valued. A classroom can serve as a place, a place where student voices are privileged and where the lived experiences (Fecho et al., 2011a, 2011b; Fecho et al., 2021; Stewart, 2010) and literacies (Donehower, 2003; Donehower et al., 2007; Edmondson, 2003) of students are utilized.

Classroom as Place

Kerri, Catherine, and Caroline each prided themselves on having cultivated a classroom environment that was inviting for students, where students would feel empowered and welcome. Caroline specifically notes the importance of seeking with "authenticity" a classroom environment that is inviting for students and one that fosters growth (Participant 3, Stage 3, Final Interview). Each of the participants made moves to discuss their communities within the space of their classroom.

In the first lesson that I observed with Caroline (Participant 3, Stage 2, Round 1, Observation Field Notes, 18 March 18), the class was continuing their work with *Roots*. Catherine proposed the question, as several students had mentioned their Cherokee connections in a previous class: "Are we connected to our history regardless of whether we were there or not?" (Participant 3, Stage 2, Round 1, Observation Field Notes, 18 March 18). Multiple students visibly nodded their heads. One student replied to Caroline's question: "If I was a Jew, I wouldn't have no personal connection to the Holocaust." Directly following his remark, a female student disagreed with her peer. Caroline used the opportunity to bring in a novel they read in the previous class, English 2, to remind students of Elie Wiesel's *Night*. She offered that this notion of Jewish people being "Born without people" due to the large scale loss of Jewish ancestors who perished during the Holocaust. The same female student who spoke previously said, "All of us here are white. Like none of us, we can't speak to things like that." (Participant 3, Stage

2, Round 1, Observation Field Notes, 18 March 18). This discussion led to a nuanced dialogue about handed down trauma concerning land and culture.

I was struck by the fact that the female student who spoke up to disagree with her peer regarding the Jewish experience had what I credit with being the courage to do so. Upon asking Caroline about the incident in the classroom later (Participant 3, Stage 2, Round 1, Post-Observation), Caroline expressed that she was pleased that the student voiced her opinion in class and decided to speak up. I believe that this occurrence is an example of the welcoming classroom environment that Caroline has created. Both students, regardless of how Caroline or I might feel about the former comment or the latter, clearly felt that they could express themselves within their English language arts classroom (Participant 3, Stage 2, Round 1, Observation Field Notes, 18 March 18).

Across the data set, all three participants addressed the need to have a classroom space where students could express themselves and that space had to be a place that would allow for uncomfortable conversations (Fecho et al., 2021). Caroline articulated the need to be able to assist students even during the times she may not agree with their topic of choice, such as when working through a paper (Participant 3, Stage 2, Round 2, Post-Observation). Central to having a classroom that is truly a learning-centered classroom is fostering transactional dialogue in the classroom that can lean into uncomfortable conversations, even for the teacher (Fecho et al., 2021).

Tending to Rural Stereotypes and Deficit Mindsets

Being intentional about learning about the rural community in which one teaches in and resides is a key component of tending to rural stereotypes and deficit mindsets that

may exist in the lived experiences and perceptions of students, teachers, and community members (Azano & Biddle, 2019; Azano et al., 2021b; Corbett, 2007).

Caroline's understanding and appreciation for the stereotypes her rural students face (Azano et al., 2021a; Theobald & Wood, 2010) was consistently nuanced and multi-layered. For any person to have that working understanding of stereotypes and mindsets that their students encounter and navigate is impressive. However, knowing that Caroline is originally from London rather than rural North Carolina in Western County, makes such an understanding even more so. However, Caroline made connections numerous times in class regarding stereotypes that she faced when arriving in the American South as a teenager. Based upon my observations, for Caroline, part of the way that she negotiated student-led comments regarding stereotypes was through not shying away from the possible awkwardness or tension that might arise from addressing a possibly contentious topic.

Caroline described a small group of Mexican students that she taught during a particular semester. Rather than remain in one of Caroline's sections of non-honors English which they had been enrolled in previously, the students were moved to a section of honors English based upon their demonstrated abilities in Caroline's previous class. As a result of the classroom move, the students were with a teacher other than Caroline. Three days went by and suddenly the students were in Caroline's class again. Caroline expressed shock that the students were in her class again on the third day of the semester, quickly asking what had happened for the students to leave their new English classroom. The students expressed that they did not fit into the honors class. Caroline recalled their

collective response: “No. We didn’t like it there. We’re back.” (Participant 3, Stage 3, Final Interview).

Caroline indicated that part of that dynamic was possibly connected to the absence of other Mexican students in the new class (Participant 3, Stage 3, Final Interview). Retelling and reflecting upon the story in the process, it was evident that Caroline was worried that the students were made uncomfortable or that something negative had occurred to cause them to return to her classroom rather than be in the honors sections. Caroline reasoned that much of the situation had to do with the classroom climate: “If you want to get authenticity, you’re going to have to be authentic yourself and you’re going to have to create a classroom environment where they are not intimidated.” (Participant 3, Stage 3, Final Interview).

This data point speaks to the need for intentionality in the English language arts classroom, a goal that is seen across the data set. Caroline’s call for authenticity on the part of the teacher is a call for teachers to attend to biases or asymmetrical hierarchies that may directly or indirectly influence the environment of their classroom.

Conclusion

Caroline, in the initial interview (Participant 3, Stage 2, Intake Interview) explained what she saw her role as in the English department as what her principal described as the “critical juncture teacher” at the school. Having described her “Safety Net” senior English class the second semester of school crafted to help students pass English after having failed the first semester, Caroline articulated what drives her as a teacher.

> I enjoy teaching the kids who do not have an easy life for some reason. I feel that, I don't know. It makes it feel that…. I mean it's worthwhile to teach somebody English and literature and how to write and – but it seems *more* worthwhile for them somehow. I know that sounds cheesy, doesn't it? That cliché teacher, like, "I'm saving the kids!" But that's kind of how I feel and if I didn't have that, I don't know if I could keep going. I don't know if I could keep doing this everyday if I did not have that little thing inside me that drives me there. (Participant 3, Stage 1, Intake Interview)

Though Caroline gave a small laugh after her purposefully exaggerated declaration, "I'm saving the kids!" (Participant 3, Stage 1, Intake Interview), it was clear across numerous data points that she is deeply committed to supporting all students at Bethem High School and has a drive in doing so. Though this data point demonstrated Caroline's commitment to her students and the call I perceive that she had, there is also within it shadows of a real danger that so easily crept into our mindsets as teachers and researchers, especially when thinking about rural communities that are so often viewed from a deficit mindset (Azano & Biddle, 2019; Theobald & Wood, 2010). Now, I want to be clear that I am not assuming that Caroline was harrowing herself as the "savior" for her students. We must be cautious of the susceptibility of falling into that deficit mindset where it takes a university educated teacher or a teacher from outside the community to "save" the students. Such thinking works to reinforce hierarchies that privilege structures of power that exclude students and their communities. Teachers must be intentional in working to dismantle such mindsets that are predicated on hierarchies that further marginal students, their lived experiences, and their voices.

Across the data set, all three participants echoed the need for intentionality in the classroom and a need to see students as people, people worthy of respect and love. The fact that each participant showed knowledge of their students and rural community was not just indicative of being from small rural communities. The knowledge that Kerri, Catherine, and Caroline showcased was developed via intentionality and a desire to support their students beyond the English language arts classroom. I observed that all three participants cared about and were invested in the lives of their students. First and foremost, they each saw their students as humans. In chapter 5, I will speak more on this. As un-academic as it may sound, at the heart of supporting students, regardless of their place, is to see students as human beings who each carry unique lived experiences, who each have stories to tell, who each are endowed with possibility. When we do that, the classroom becomes a place where students and teachers can learn and grow from each other and where all voices can be heard.

The understandings I developed in this study work together to index the ways that positioning students' voices and lived experiences as key drivers in a learning-centered classroom (Fecho et al., 2021) can help teachers support students as they bring classroom content into dialogue with their individual lived experiences (Fecho 2011a, 2011b; Fecho et al., 202; Stewart 2010). Such dialogue, particularly in the English classroom, can offer students a means of engagement with the curriculum and an opportunity to learn about themselves, and to critically examine the world around them (Azano & Biddle, 2019; Freire 1990) in the service of living a personally fulfilling life and make the world a better place.

Chapter 5: Discussion

Preamble

I begin Chapter 5 with a participant story that gives a glimpse into the multi-faceted tension that can arise in schools when teachers seek to enact a learning-centered pedagogical stance. The story illustrates what it can be like when a teacher finds their self dealing with uncertainty and their ability to follow their convictions even when that situation is filled with uncertainty. For Kerri, she experienced the intersection between a nation-wide reckoning and a snapshot of how that movement was playing out in her rural community.

Andrew Brown Jr. was shot and killed by police officers on April 21, 2021 in Elizabeth City, North Carolina (Hassan, 2021). A shot fired at the back of Brown's head was listed as the cause of death. Brown's death echoed the death of another unarmed Black man, George Floyd, who died almost a year prior after a police officer kneeled on his neck for nine minutes (The New York Times, 2021). The conflicting narratives surrounding Brown's death were like salt in the wound for a county still stricken with grief over the death of Floyd, ripe with anger. Rather than serving as a small wave in a vast ocean, Brown's death was a watershed moment in North Carolina, once again proving that racial justice in the United States, as Martin Luther King Jr. said in 1963, a check for which funds remained inadequate.

Less than a week after the events in Elizabeth City, I met with Kerri for one of our three collaborative sessions. When I inquired whether or not Kerri was supported by her school in talking about the events in Elizabeth City, Kerri gave me a one word answer: "No." (Participant 1, Stage 2, Round 3, Co-Panning). Her answer and subsequent elaboration were not just in regards to the events of April 21, but also in response to a recent incident that occurred in her county in which an image circulated of county students reenacting Floyd's final moments, "We're not allowed to talk about it. We're not. And I'm like the squeaky wheel." (Participant 1, Stage 2, Round 3, Co-Panning). Kerri described exchanges between herself and her school administration, illustrating the resistance she faced supporting Black students, as well as other marginalized groups, including the LGBTQ+ community:

> I'm that one that says like, "This kid wants to be called a different name because they identify as a gender that's not on their thing. Let's call them by it." "Oh no. We don't need to." "*Yes*. It will make them feel comfortable in class." Like I'm that teacher. I don't understand what the big deal is. I have to constantly push for stuff like that." (Participant 1, Stage 2, Round 3, Co-Panning)

For Kerri, her label as the "squeaky wheel" and the veil of silence requested by her school administration spoke to a larger issue with supporting Black students and LGBTQ+ students. Kerri closed her response by stating with evident frustration and sadness, "It's *tolerated* that I'm more liberal but it's not… it's not *encouraged*. Which… they're not liberal ideas." (Participant 1, Stage 2, Round 3, Co-Panning). Kerri was hurt by her administration and the resistance to those practices that would create a safe space

for conversations surrounding systemic racism and intersectionality of gender. Please note that here that I am not using conversation as a synonym for dialogue. I will discuss later in this chapter, when addressing rural school administrators as stakeholders, that transactional dialogue is what I believe is needed between teachers and administrators rather than conversations on potentially difficult topics. What Kerri was describing previously (Participant 1, Stage 2, Round 3, Co-Panning) was a lack of support from her administrators and school staff on addressing specific sets of human rights issues: police violence against Black people and inclusion for the LGTBQ+ community. Rather than being taken seriously, she was seen as the "squeaky wheel" (Participant 1, Stage 2, Round 3, Co-Panning).

Kerri's line of being the squeaky wheel at her school stuck with me weeks after our meeting. I allowed the line to move around my thoughts. I associate being a squeaky wheel as being used in the most pejorative sense, as someone not going with the ways things are or as someone who reminds others of what they wish to avoid. Kerri had previously explained that guardians had explicitly asked that she not prominently display the "Black children's book" example when conducting the make-your-own-children's book project with her students (Participant 1, Stage 2, Round 3, Co-Planning). Was Kerri being a squeaky wheel in that moment in the classroom when guardians were made comfortable with the optics and topic of a children's book? With that line of thinking, does being the proverbial squeaky wheel occur when you make people comfortable by speaking or pointing to an uncomfortable truth?

Kerri had to navigate a difficult situation, one in which she held convictions that supported her choice to avoid possible complicity by voicing her concerns to her school

administration. My analysis of Kerri's story helped me to understand through her lived experience the complex intersection between seeking to be learning-centered and the complexities of teaching in a rural place. In this snapshot of Kerri's experience of being a rural English language arts teacher, I see strands of the three research questions of this study come into play such as what happens when teachers encounter challenges in rural context when seeking to work from a pedagogical stance? I was able to hear Kerri tell the story of how she responded to the challenges she faced in the spring of 2021.

The stories of Kerri, Catherine, and Caroline help to build a guide to help answer the questions first outlined in chapter 1. However, now it is time to address what this study and its findings and tell us in secondary education and rural education about how rural English language arts teachers can employ the study's understandings and implications in order to support their rural students and their rural administrators.

Implications and Recommendations

In thinking about the four understandings detailed in chapter 4, guided by the three research questions in chapter 1, how do the understandings from this study serve as implications and recommendations for rural English language arts teachers, rural school administrators, rural students, and rural and secondary education researchers? In the following section, I will explain the implications associated with each understanding and applicable recommendations for teachers, administrators, and researchers in rural contexts.

Supporting Student Connections Via Instructional Design

Here I will unpack the implications of supporting student connections with the use of instructional design in the secondary English language arts classroom. One of the three

main understandings of this study is that participants felt more confident helping students dialogue about their lived experiences in the classroom (Fecho, 2011a; 2011b; Fecho et al., 2021; Stewart, 2010) when they implemented instruction focused on student voice. As seen with examples from Kerri, Catherine, and Caroline, when they implemented instructional design with the goal of supporting student voices and utilizing students' lived experiences, participants perceived that their students were making connections with the content of the classroom.

The Use of Instructional Design: Data Points as Illustration

Before diving into the implications of the use of instructional design in the English language arts class, I first want to point out two data points that I think best illustrate the intentional use of instructional design in the classroom to support students. Those examples will serve as a springboard for unpacking the implications and subsequent recommendations regarding instructional design.

Catherine, following an observed class on an introduction to Ibsen's *A Doll's House* where students participated in transactional dialogue regarding conventional gender roles (Participant 2, Stage 2, Round 3, Observation, 22 April), explained that students stayed in her classroom into their lunch period in order to continue their conversation about relationships (Participant 2, Stage 2, Round 3, Post-Observation). In the time following the observed class period, according to Catherine, students continued talking about stories shared in the class while also discussing topics that they realized through the class dialogue that they had in common, such as complicated father-daughter relationships (Participant 2, Stage 2, Round 3, Post-Observation). I observed in the classroom session that students appeared to be excited about sharing their thoughts and

experiences with their peers. From my subsequent conversation with Catherine, she appeared to feel more confident moving forward in the play study knowing that students were making connections to the universal themes and relationship-oriented ideas that were arising from class dialogue. Catherine came to this conclusion because of the stories that she heard students sharing in class and what she learned from them.

I think to the "Personal Legends" projects and "This I Believe" statements that Kerri utilized in her classes. The assignments not only served as spaces for students to express themselves but they also served as a means for Kerri to learn more about her students (Participant 1, Stage 1, Intake Interview). When other teachers expressed frustration with a student, Kerri invited them to listen to the student's literal story: "We've had kids' teachers before that have been like so confused about what's going on with the kids and I'm like 'Just listen to this two-minute thing they've recorded and you'll understand all of this stuff about them.' So I think that's good." (Participant 1, Stage 1, Intake Interview).

Implications of Supporting Student Connections Via Instructional Design

In the above examples from the data set from Catherine and Kerri, I wanted to pull two data points as illustrations before further discussing implications of supporting student connections through the use of instructional design. Kerri's used instructional design with the Personal Legends project (Participant 1, Stage 1, Intake Interview), which aided in her efforts to better understand her students. A possibly unexpected result of the Personal Legends was that Kerri was able to help lay the groundwork for her colleagues to have a more informed insight into the students' lives as well. The culturally linked anticipation guide that Catherine and her class engaged in (Participant 2, Stage 2, Round

3, Post-Observation) not only served as preparation for latter dialogue related to the text, but also as a space for students to find connections with their peers. The instructional design as used by Kerri and Catherine had positive consequences beyond their original intention, impacting teachers and students.

Helping Students Make Meaning. In order to support rural students, or any student, we must first view them as people. Students are not a number stitched on their jersey, a given-name they no longer identify with on the class roster, or a numerical grade penciled in the English 10 grade book. As teachers, we are *choosing* to be in the classroom by virtue of our selected occupation. We have chosen that job. However, the students in our classroom are *required* to be there, though we may be unaware of whether or not they *want* to be there. Teachers can seek to support all students in the classroom, regardless of the students' attitude towards being in the classroom.

When teachers are intentional about helping students make meaning through the use of instructional design, students are supported. That support matters just as the intention behind those instructional moves matters. Teachers should be intentional in creating opportunities in the classroom that help support students in their efforts to connect with the material presented. The implication is that students will have not only more opportunities to connect with the material of the course, but such instructional moves will support students when enacted purposefully. If teachers are working from a learning-centered stance, they must be thoughtful with their instructional moves and choices in curriculum texts. Such moves and choices in the classroom may require vulnerability on the part of the classroom teacher. Teaching from a pedagogical stance that seeks to dismantle hierarchies requires vulnerability as the teacher is learning from

students rather than a traditional setup. Creating opportunities for students, seeking their voices, and valuing their contributions is invaluable if teachers truly want to treat, teach, and learn from their students as humans.

When teachers fail to make student learning and student connections a priority in the classroom, they are enacting a pedagogy that implies that the needs of students and their lived experiences are not as important as the predetermined material of the classroom. Such thinking calls back to the banking model of education, positioning students as receptacles rather than active learners with agency in their education (Freire, 1990). "Depositing" the same information to students in the classroom without differentiating or prioritizing creating curriculum that helps students make meaningful connections, is explicitly saying two things. First, such a pedagogical stance implies the belief that all students are the same and can be presented with the same curriculum. Second, it asserts that students do not need to make meaningful connections with the material of the classroom. Either the students are unable to make connections or that they are going to do anything further with the material so it does not matter if they do not engage with the material. With both of these implications for not supporting students with meaning-making, students are being stripped of their identifies as humans with lived experiences that are important, that matter, and that can influences others.

Students are sources of funds knowledge (Fecho, 2011b; González et al., 2005). In a learning-centered classroom, teachers are learning from students, students are learning from the teacher, and students learn from fellow students (Fecho et al., 2021). A dialogic stance in the classroom, which can come from a learning-centered stance, means that teachers are making meaning in the classroom along with their students (Fecho,

2011a, 2011b). Students appeared to feel confident in sharing their stories and ideas as they sought to make connections with the text of the classroom. The data across this study points to the truth that stories matter. Stories were central to the work of all three participants as they sought to engage with and support their students from the moment their students stepped into the class and the moment students prepared to walk out the door: *How was your weekend with this great warmer weather? Tell me all about winning the championship soccer match! Hey, are you still having to work all those hours at your job? Is your father still in the hospital?* In other words, *I want to know what is going on in your life. Tell me a story.*

Building Teacher Confidence. Kerri and Catherine both expressed in interviews that they did not feel like they knew enough about pedagogical theories (Participant 1, Stage 1, Intake Interview) or the texts taught in their English language arts classroom (Participant 1, Stage 2, Round 2, Post-Observation; Participant 2, Stage 1, Intake Interview). When thinking about challenges that teachers may face in the classroom when seeking to work from a learning-centered pedagogical stance, there are two different challenges that deal with confidence. The first can be categorized as an abundance of confidence in one's knowledge of a topic where in which a classroom teacher might be susceptible to monopolizing the lesson. I use the term monopolizing to point to an absence of dialogue in a classroom.

The second challenge regarding confidence is the lack there of for teachers. Teachers may feel less than confident or unsure about implementing instruction that they feel they have less control over. I am not attempting to insinuate that a learning-centered classroom lacks structure or the control of the teacher. I am offering that teachers may

fear that a classroom that is not based on or run by a traditional hierarchy (Freire, 1990; Lortie, 1975) maybe a classroom they cannot control. By intentionally flattening hierarchies in the classroom, teachers are democratizing control and that dynamic must be normalized.

For teachers in the secondary English language arts classroom, the intentional use of instructional design functions as a way of helping teachers feel confident in their efforts to support student voices. In order to fully understand why such an implication of teacher confidence would be important, it is important to consider teachers in terms of the deficit mindset of rurality (Corbett, 2007; Dahill-Brown & Jochim, 2010; Theobald & Wood, 2010) and the impact of rural stereotypes (Gurley, 2015; Reynolds, 2017a; Theobald, 1997). Just as rural students can be impact by a deficit mindset of rurality, so can teachers and the schools within which they teach. Teachers could feel less capable because of a lack of teacher education programing through the school district or because of limited resources. If teachers who want to help students connect with the course material feel that they are unsuccessful, they will likely lack confidence in their teaching and pedagogical approaches to the curriculum. If teachers lack confidence in their abilities in the classroom, they will be less inclined to feel capable of taking risks or leaning into wobble moments (Fecho, 2011b) in the classroom in regards to curriculum.

An intentional use of instructional design can aid teachers in fostering a learning-centered classroom. Teachers must be intentional about the moves they make in the classroom. The question must always be: In this lesson, how am I seeking to support students? Sharing about the experience of teaching from a learning-centered stance would be impactful and helpful for colleagues. Teaching from a learning-centered stance

requires vulnerability. If a teacher that was new to the pedagogical stance had a small group of like-minded colleagues to troubleshoot with, dialogue with, and collaborate with, they would be more confident in their pursuit.

It is also about looking ahead as a teacher and being willing to be wrong. Just because something has been done one way, does not mean that it remains the best way. Teachers, as life-long learners, must be willing to grow in their knowledge and understanding of their chosen field. If teachers are willing to be vulnerable and grow, it will benefit their students and it will benefit the teacher.

Recommendations for Supporting Connections in the Classroom

The two established implications of teachers supporting connections in the rural English language arts classroom are that (1) such instructional moves show students that they are their learning matter, and (2) that teachers can be more confident in their ability to implement instruction that supports students. In terms of recommendations concerning supporting students in meaning-making in the classroom through instructional design, I have two overarching recommendations that apply to multiple groups: (1) priority and funding must be given to professional development, and (2) there needs to be a shift in departments and schools to being learning-centered.

Professional Development. On a department level, teachers can promote a culture that values professional development and seeks to adapt curriculum. I understand the need to rely on existing curriculum in the classroom. When teachers have multiple preps, the need to have a solid and reliable set of curricula is invaluable. However, the danger becomes that teachers and their departments might dismiss the need to rethink and revaluate curriculum each year, let alone in how to make instructional moves to better fit

the needs of students class to class. If professional development is valued across the department, teachers can share resources and ideas.

School administrators in rural school districts have a role within supporting teachers' efforts to create opportunities for students to connect with the material of the classroom through the prioritization of professional development. This may seem like an incredibly simplistic recommendation, but teachers are going to be more likely and able to seek out professional development that will further develop their pedagogy when it is valued within their school culture on department, school, and district levels. So much good can come from the affirmation and support of administrators to teachers. Such support can come through funding and opportunities for teaching workshops, materials, and conferences. Teachers must be life-long learners and academic conferences and workshops can serve as a means of not just offering learning opportunities for teachers, but can serve as a means of growing their connections and resources.

A Shift to a Learning-Centered Culture. If the is a shift to a learning-centered culture on a department, school, or district wide level, that type of cultural shift will be instrumental in supporting students. On a school wide or district level, administrators can encourage a learning-centered culture through focused professional develop.

Professional development is a means supporting such a cultural shift because it reinforces the notion that teachers are life-long learners who can adapt and reflect on their existing beliefs and pedagogies. This type of shift can come on a department level if teachers are transparent about their classrooms, such as reflecting with colleagues about their struggles, challenges, and successes in the classroom. Workshops with colleagues

can serve as a safe space for reflections and brainstorming of ways to better support students.

Attending to Biases and Seeking Classroom Dialogue

I will now address the second large implication, which his based on the second understanding from the data analysis. The study found that rural English language arts teachers navigate rural specific tensions through intentionally dialoguing with students and attending to potential biases.

Attending to Biases and Seeking Classroom Dialogue: Data Points as Illustration

There were several examples within the data set from all three participants in which they attended to their biases. I believe that the English language arts classroom is inherently geared towards dialogue with students. From drawing upon texts, to making meaning, to writing about lived experiences (Fecho, 2011) in conjunction with national and local events, the English language arts classroom holds many opportunities to support students. Though there are many data points that illustrate this implication well, I want to revisit one in particular: Caroline, Horatio, and the immigration (Participant 3, Stage 3, Final Interview).

I think to when Caroline sought to support Horatio, her student who was writing his research paper about the dangers of immigration (Participant 3, Stage 3, Final Interview). Caroline disclosed to me that she had to be intentional during the one-on-one conferencing not to interject her held biases regarding the topic. Caroline spoke numerous times about immigrating to the States from London when she was teenager. For Caroline, the immigration and citizenship process was scary. Caroline told the story

of when her father made errors in the family's immigration paperwork, throwing their status into jeopardy. That memory became fresh in Caroline's mind in thinking about Horatio's topic. Caroline knew that she could not dismiss her biases, but she could be intentional in her interaction with Horatio as she sought to help him draw upon his experiences to better inform his paper. Even though the situation of working on a paper on anti-immigration was uncomfortable for her as an immigrant, Caroline was able to see the potential of the situation. Caroline retained hope that any discussions related to the topic could potentially help other students better understand the immigration process and its uncertainty: "Maybe it can shine light on things for other kids in the room who have never thought about immigration other than perhaps what their parents think about it but they might start to think about it." (Participant 3, Stage 3, Final Interview). Rather than vowing to avoid any potentially difficult discussions of immigration, Caroline was willing to help facilitate such discussions with students in order to support students in thinking about a complicated and, for Caroline, a deeply personal topic.

Implications of Attending to Biases and Seeking Classroom Dialogue

Regarding the larger implication of attending to biases and seeking dialogue in the classroom, there are two things that stand out: (1) that attending to biases can lead to more compassionate teachers, and (2) that seeking classroom dialogue can help to create a classroom that serves as a safe space for students to critical think about the world around them.

Compassionate Teachers and the Classroom as Belonging. If rural English language arts teachers are attending to biases and seeking to support students through classroom dialogue, a resulting implication is a classroom environment in which students

feel connected to in terms of belonging. In order to create an English language arts classroom that seeks to dialogue with students and support their lived experiences, teachers must create and embrace opportunities for students to use their lived experiences, literacies, and place-based connections in the classroom.

Opportunities for creating space for adolescents' voices and experiences exist for teachers who are seeking to help students develop the literate practices necessary to make meaning from texts. The collapsing of traditional hierarchies is at the heart of creating a learning-centered classroom where students feel valued, accepted, and willing to take academic risks. When teachers dismantle traditional hierarchies in the learning-centered classroom (Fecho et al., 2021), the result is the opportunity for a classroom for students to share their experiences and build autonomy in the classroom.

I think back to Caroline's story of the group of Mexican students she had who returned to her classroom only a few days after being placed in a more advanced course (Participant 3, Stage 3, Final Interview). The students did not feel that they belonged in the new classroom because, at least in part, because of the environment. That data point is far more nuanced and there are other issues at place, such as whether or not anything, implicitly or explicitly, occurred to cause the students to feel like they would not be able to be successful in a classroom that was not Caroline's. However, we can assert that at the most basic level, students are going to be less likely to take academic risks in a classroom space in which they do not feel supported and safe. By academic risks, I mean things such as being in a higher-level class, speaking up when they are unsure about the topic, and sharing their work. If we, as teachers, value students, we have to show that

belief through how we interact with students, the classroom culture, and environment we create, and what we privilege in the curriculum.

Critical Thinking. Fecho (2004) discussed the critical inquiry classroom, arguing that teachers must structure lessons, questions, and examinations in order to help guide the meaning-making process. Students can use reading, writing, and learning as a means of navigating and critiquing both their culture and mainstream culture. Students need these opportunities to "make meaning, to gain an existential understanding of their place in the world" (p. 145). When traditional hierarchies are collapsed in the classroom, rural English language arts teachers can create a positive classroom environment with the goal of students' feeling supported and valued. Within that positive environment, students and teachers can attend to the biases that exist within the culture around them, their rural communities, and within their own lived experiences. Students can write their own world (Freire & Macedo, 1987).

Part of the charge of the English language arts classroom is to support students in critical thinking. Students are learning to read the world around them, critically thinking and critically engaging in the texts of their lives. When critical thinking is absent from the English language arts classroom, teachers are failing to help show students the power they have in the learning process. Critical thinking is a form of empowerment. Engaging in critical thinking in the English language arts classroom not only helps students engage with the curriculum of the classroom, but it helps them to engage with the text of their lived experiences. If we, as teachers, are utilizing the lived experiences of students to support them in critical thinking, we care upholding the hierarchies of the traditional classroom, hierarchies that have systematically held back students for generations.

When students are critically engaged with the texts of their lives, they can examine, learn, and challenge the power systems in the world around them. That dynamic is how change happens. If we are concerned with the deficit mindset of rurality and dichotomies that have the potential to limit student success, we should actively work towards empowering students and helping to equip them with the tools that they already possess to navigate the world around them.

Attending to Biases and Seeking Classroom Dialogue: Recommendations

In order to attend to biases in the classroom, I recommend the need for intentional conversations. Intentional conversations need to occur on the levels of class, department, and school in order to create opportunities for transactional dialogue regarding complex topics. These topics include deficit mindsets of rurality that might impact the expectations of teachers for students (i.e., what is deemed a successful post-graduation path for students or what literacies are valued), and racial tensions in the community that impact the physical and mental health of students and their families.

Intentional Conversations in the Classroom. When I recommend that rural English language arts teachers need to attend to their biases in the classroom, I am not suggesting that all biases are inherently negative. However, teachers should be aware of their held biases and attend to them as they create instructional design, seek to support students, and draw upon student experiences. Rural people are often depicted with a deficit mindset in mainstream culture (Gurley, 2015; Reynolds, 2017a; Pozner, 2010; Theobald, 1997; Theobald & Wood, 2010). Critically thinking and discussing that dynamic can be a powerful tool in the classroom as students read their community and its expectations.

Intentional Conversations with Administrators. I think of Kerri's depiction of her administration's response to talking about current events regarding issues of racial of injustice. Kerri cited her administration's desire to keep up with appearances, as it were, as a reason for not encouraging potentially difficult conversations regarding the Black Lives Matter movement, police violence, and LGBTQ+ inclusivity. While I recognize that school administrators directly deal with the concerns of guardians and community members, and therefore must exercise a level of discernment, school administrators cannot shy away from important dialogues that need to take place. If school systems and school administrators value their teachers as professionals then they must be willing to engage in transactional dialogue (Fecho et al. 2020) with teachers regarding important issues, even those that may seem contentious or heavy with differing views. Those conversations that are nuanced as heavy, such as those regarding racial injustices and LGBTQ+ inclusivity are imperative. Regardless of the outcome of the conversations, teachers should be respected enough by their administrations to be heard regarding what is happening that impacts their students.

Utilizing Students' Lived Experiences, Literacies, and Place-Based Connections

In this section, I will address implications related to the third understanding of this study. When rural English language arts teachers can support students' meaning-making with the content of the classroom through utilizing students' lived experiences, literacies, and place-based connections. We have to expand our working definition of what is "inside" the classroom and what is "outside" the classroom. The lives of students do not begin and end at the opening and closing of a classroom door. The lived experiences of students, their literacies, and connections to place are part of their identity (Theobald &

Wood, 2010) and be utilized to support their meaning making in the classroom in a powerful way.

Utilizing Students' Lived Experiences, Literacies, and Place-Based Connections: Data Points as Illustration

Before further unpacking the use of students' lived experience in the English language arts classroom in order to support students' voices, I will present a relevant finding from the data set. Kerri presented two rich examples of rural literacies from the lives of her students: Theo who worked as a volunteer firefighter at the local station, and Ben who hunted, producing beef jerky (Participant 1, Stage 2, Intake Interview). Both students were demonstrating secondary discourses or rural literacies (Azano et al., 2021b; Donehower, 2007). Kerri was excited to learn about Theo and Ben's passions because not only did she realize such dialogue was a way to reach out to them, but she also was authentically excited about their accomplishments. Kerri asserted that we should celebrate these types of skills in students (Participant 1, Stage 2, Intake Interview). That nation of celebrating is key to understanding the implications of utilizing the lived experiences of students.

Implications of Utilizing Students' Lived Experiences, Literacies, and Place-Based Connections

I see two areas of implications in regards to the ways in which teachers seek to support rural adolescent students by utilizing students' lived experiences, literacies, and place-based connections in the English language arts classroom. The first implication is that utilizing lived experiences, literacies, and place-based connections will attend to the deficit mindset of rurality by celebrating students' funds of knowledge. The second

implication is that utilizing student connections can support student autonomy and students' sense of value.

Attend to Deficit Mindset of Rurality. If teachers do not seek to utilize the lived experiences, literacies, and place-based connections of students in the rural English language arts classroom, they are complicit in ignoring the lives of their students. If teachers are truly seeking to teach from a learning-centered stance, they will be willing to invite in and create space for the voices of their students.

In rural education, a deficit mindset is problematic in that it does not value the efforts of teachers in rural schools. To counter the deficit mindset often associated with rural education, McShane and Smarick (2018) argued that rural education research, in order to expand "on the strengths of rural communities and the citizens that inhabit them" (p. 5), researchers have to go beyond the deficit mindset that often remains the focus when examining rural communities. Rather than focusing on perceived weaknesses within rural communities, researchers concerned with rural education must focus on the opportunities (Azano & Biddle, 2019) that exist within rural communities. In this way, rural researchers honor and support the work of rural educators. Only focusing on those criticisms and concerns does not create space for what is promising and where there is strength. We can work on areas of concern (i.e., perceived constraints of rurality, such as possible economic constraints) while still uplifting areas of promise (i.e., perceived affordances of rurality, such as close-knit communities).

Support Student Autonomy. Rurality is not often seen in standard curriculum across grade levels (Edmondson & Butler, 2010). What happens when students do not see themselves in the curriculum of the classroom? How are they supposed to feel that they

belong in that space? Students cannot and will not feel accepted in a space where they do not feel themselves. Teachers must take a long hard look at the value systems that are at play, implicitly or explicitly so, in their classroom. Through the teaching of the standard curriculum, as well as the unwritten curriculum, what literacies are we telling students are valued? With our words, actions, and expectations, are we saying that writing is the skill that matters rather than hunting? Are we saying that being on the debate team is more important than being a firefighter? Are we saying that only a college degree matters rather than a technical school degree?

Student autonomy will come with the celebration of the lived experiences, literacies, and connections of students. Space must be created in the classroom for students to utilize their funds of knowledge and be celebrated for their funds of knowledge. Kerri spoke at length about the life skills that Theo and Ben demonstrated with their rural literacies. Each student showed dedication (i.e., the long hours and physical strength demanded at the firehouse), planning (i.e., the long list of procedures and safety measures needed to prepare the land for a hunt), and passion (i.e., the willingness to be in the risk-filled field of firefighting). The skills of dedication, planning, and passion are essential for success in any job, relationship, or commitment that one might find themselves in. Certainly all of these skills benefit a community. Such skills are normally valued in the traditional education classroom. Our feelings about such skills should be no different when they come out of literacies that are not typically privileged in the classroom.

Just as we must value different literacies in the classroom, we must be mindful to value and utilize the lived experiences and place-based connections of students. Stories

have power as does the invitation to tell one's story. When the stories of students are privileged and sought in the classroom, students have control and autonomy in the classroom because their stories are audible and can be used to create meaning. The stories of students are being voiced, heard, and received. This is an example of a means of countering the deficit mindset of rurality that can be so impactful to rural students (Azano & Biddle, 2019; Corbett, 2007; Theobald & Wood, 2010).

When rural voices are voice, heard, and received in the education, the stories of lived experiences can get be utilized with the curriculum of the classroom. The alternative is to marginalize students in a space that is supposed to empower them. By not seeking out the stories of students, we are saying that their stories, their literacies, and their connections are not of value or worth in a space of learning. We are saying that what they have lived and what they know lack lessons to be learned by others, including the teacher and their peers. This thinking perpetuates a deficit mindset that what is rural, what is outside of school, or what is young, lacks worth.

Utilizing Lived Experiences: Recommendations

To utilize the lived experiences and literacies of students in the classroom, I recommend two ideas: (1) teachers must be intentional in creating opportunities in their classroom for the lived experiences of students, (2) researchers and educators must value and support the possibilities that can be found in their rural place through the stories and lived experiences.

Creating Opportunities for Lived Experiences. If teachers are working from a learning-centered stance, they must be intentional in their classrooms to make space for the lived experiences of students. This can come through instructional design that seeks

to draw upon students' lives as a way of connecting with the curriculum. However, students are not going to share their lived experiences in a space they do not feel welcome in, regardless of how well planned a lesson might be. Teachers must seek to create a classroom environment that is not reliant on traditional hierarchies, but rather collapses them (Fecho et al., 2021). Teachers must be aware of their possible tendency to rely on traditional hierarchies in the classroom. In paying attention to and attending to a reliance on hierarchy in the classroom, teachers will be more successful in dismantling hierarchies to welcome in their students.

I have discussed the importance of collapsing hierarchies that exist in the classroom in order to foster a learning-centered classroom (Fecho et al., 2021). When the traditional hierarchies are no longer a hindrance, voices can be supported. I think this same principle is key in thinking about supporting dialogue between classroom teachers and school administrators in rural schools.

Seeing the Possible in Place. One way of countering the narrative of loss (i.e., a focus on the deficit mindset of rurality) into a narrative of possibility (i.e., the affordances and opportunities that exist in rural place) (Azano & Biddle, 2019) is utilizing the stories of teachers and students in rural places. If we value as researchers and fellow educators the work of rural educators, we must help amplify their voices rather than speaking for them. Rural teachers are the ones that are navigating the cultural tensions that can arise in rural, are the ones supporting their students in the classroom, and are the ones seeking to be sustaining resources in their place. For example, Kerri's story of attempting to engage her administration in a dialogue regarding racism and its proximity to their school showed the tensions that she has to navigate as a teacher in a rural community. Though

Kerri's experience is not everyone's, the experience is hers. It was an experience she had to navigate that impacted her in many ways. However, that experience and its nuances would not be known if that story was not sought out. In order to better understand the efforts of rural teachers to support students, we need to see teachers as experts in what they do and as sources in their own right.

Just as we should see teachers as sources to help address the affordances and constraints of rurality, we should see students in the same way. I addressed in chapter 1 how the affordances (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 2001; Sherman, 2017) and constraints of rurality, as well as a deficit mindset of rurality (Azano & Biddle, 2019; Corbett, 2007; Dahill-Brown & Jochim, 2018) influence the ways in which rurality is part of one's identity, especially as a young person. For some students, rurality and place are a strong and positive part of their identity, such a Kerri's student for demonstrated his sustaining rural literacy (Azano et al., 2021b; Donehower, 2007) of hunting on his family's land and producing jerky from his finds (Participant 1, Stage 2, Intake Interview). Specifically if we, as rural researchers and educators, are concerned about supporting students and enacting inclusivity, we must also value the experiences of students that are not exclusively linked with being from or of a rural place. We must focus on students as humans who have stories to tell. For teachers, this means creating opportunities to utilize student voices and to dismantle existing hierarchies in the classroom so that students truly have an audible voice in a classroom that values them.

A Key Suggestion for Future Research

In thinking about what I learned from conducting this qualitative study that sought to better understand the efforts of English language arts teachers to support the voices of

rural adolescent students in the classroom, I see a key suggestion for future research. The understandings generated in this study were based on the efforts of participants in the rural English language arts classroom, including the implementation of instructional design, the need to attend to biases, and the utilization of students lived experiences, rural literacies, and student voice. The study found that participants felt more confident in their efforts to support students' meaning-making in the classroom when implementing lessons that were designed in order to draw upon student voice. However, the study did not collect data from students. The study did not prove whether the efforts of the participants were successful. Participants expressed that they felt more confident about supporting students but the study did not include the work or stories of students.

Just as this study needed to interview and observe classroom teachers in order to hear their stories and learn about their efforts, an additional study must be done in order to hear the stories and learn about the work of rural adolescent students. A logical next step would be to conduct a qualitative study with rural adolescent participants, specifically looking at the ways in which secondary English language arts students make meaning with texts within a learning-centered classroom (Fecho et al., 2021). With the intention of gathering student stories from students, the study would focus on the experience of students in the learning-centered classroom and their connections to the material with lived experiences. I think to Gordon's (2019) study looking at the perceptions of urban students in an English language arts classroom where critical English pedagogy was being implemented. The study looked at the ways in which the actions and words of students were shaped by or shaped their critical English classroom (Gordon, 2019).

A study focused on rural adolescent students in the learning-centered English language arts classroom would include interviews, asking students semi-structured interview questions regarding their experience in the classroom and their connections with the content of the classroom. Student stories could help create a better understanding of what they connected to in the classroom and what experiences they drew upon to make those connections. I believe that such a study would be a powerful means of informing the ways in which teachers develop and implement curriculum for rural students in an effort to support meaning-making.

Attending to the Ghost and That Squeaky Wheel: A Call to Action

In the final interview, Kerri reflected on being a rural teacher during the COVID-19 pandemic which shut down schools, a pandemic whose reach hit rural areas hard economically (Participant 1, Stage 3, Final Interview). For Kerri, she saw opportunity and an audible call to action.

> Like if there are not people out here that are fighting for the things I believe in or people out here who are trying to encourage the students that life is good out here, or that they matter. I mean, you need people like that, too, you know, whether they've lived here their whole life or not. Like I am someone that came and lived here so I have a different perspective but there's a lot of people from here that are negative about it. So if everyone who is negative about a place stays there or everybody who is negative about a place leaves, it's never going to get better. You've gotta have people that care stay somewhere. So if I'm going to be somewhere, I guess I'm going to stay and invest in it… and care about it. (Participant 1, Stage

3, Final Interview)

Kerri's experience in Northern County was not always a positive one. For instance she tells the story of a vehicle, numerous times, trying to run her car off the road because of her progressive political bumper stickers. I am not trying to assert that Kerri is attempting to paint Northern County blue or push a leftist agenda. However, Kerri is stressing the importance of working towards bettering a place and being committed to sustainability (Azano et al., 2021b; Donehower, 2007).

In working with Kerri, Catherine, and Caroline over the course of the study, I saw three rural teachers who are dedicated to working with rural students in their rural North Carolina schools. Their intentionality towards the discipline of English and their loyalty towards their schools and communities were inspiring. I have often wondered over the last year and half, a period defined by the COVID-19 pandemic, if our wider-cultural definition of teacher as inspirational is part of a larger issue? This study was not focused on teachers as inspirational, but I do want to take this opportunity to point out that teaching is not without tension. There are hard things to talk about in the curriculum, texts that are in the twenty-first century context that are hard to swallow, such as the treatment of Nora in *A Doll's House,* the blatant racism of Tom in *The Great Gatsby*, or the fact that Onkonkwo's story and legacy are erased by the white colonizers in *Things Fall Apart*.

The ghosts of rural communities (i.e., the complicated histories, intuitions, or power structures that influence communities), those aspects of a culture or of a community that are troubling or rooted in a complicated legacy (Azano & Biddle, 2019; Freire, 2018), are not regulated to being the homes of mill towns and coal mines. The

ghosts of rural communities include the legacies of Black out migration due to Jim Crow-era laws. The ghosts of rural communities are the treatment of the LGBTQ+ community. I do not want to make the harmful assumption that the entire rural South is anti-LGBTQ+, racist, or misogynistic. I do want to make clear that there is a legacy in the rural South that has often traded what is problematic for what is heritage. For example, changing that former plantation that kept generations of Blacks enslaved from a slave plantation to a scenic wedding venue does not make it less of the former and more of the latter. All this to say, as much as I love the rural South – it is the place I have called home my entire life – there are systemic issues that need to be addressed. These systemic challenges are current, present, and are our part of our reality. However, they do not have to be our future.

I think back to Kerri's two calls to action. In our first session together, she said she wanted to be a resource for rural *students*. In our last session, she stressed the need to be a resource for the entire *community*. Even when she gets frustrated with systemic issues within her community, Kerri holds onto hope in her students and how that hope is enacted in the classroom. We must have hope in students not just as students, but students as human beings. Rather than having a myopic view of students as rural, we must view students as humans, value them, and believe in their possibility. This starts with intentionality, as I have spoken about before, on the part of teachers. Students can be agents of change when they are empowered in their own abilities, when they can critically think and analyze the world around them, and when they value the stories and lives of others.

We demonstrate hope in students when rural English language arts teachers treat

students as humans rather than just looking at them through a rural lens. Now, please do not hear me say that place does not matter, because it does. Place is fluid (Corbett, 2021) and rural students are influenced by their rural place (Azano & Biddle, 2019; Theobald & Wood, 2010). Rural secondary language arts teachers should be aware of the affordances and constraints of rurality, support students in critically thinking about their place, and connecting their lived experiences with the content of the classroom. Place is a crucial part of talking about supporting rural adolescent students, but it is not the silver bullet. Rather than a focus on strictly place, the stories of students are the vehicle through which we can support student voices and place is a means to story. Stories are how we navigate the world around us. They become the way we explain how something happened. We have experiences and we use stories in order to explain them to others. The people that our students come into contact with, those people become part of students' stories. Sometimes articulating one's story is the best way to grapple with it or navigate what comes next. We hear the story of another and it speaks to the story, or the wound, that is within us (Caruth, 1996; Dutro, 2011). We serve as witness and we can continue to bear witness via our own testimony with our story of our lived experience (Caruth, 1996; Dutro, 2011; Felman & Laub, 1992).

There is a mantra that it is more important how students are made to feel in the classroom rather than what they learn. That mantra is true; teachers should always be aware or perceptive of how students feel in their classroom. However, perhaps it is even more crucial how, within the classroom, students feel about themselves. At the end of the day, does it matter if students remember, in *The Great Gatsby*, that the green light at Daisy's dock is a simple of hope for Gatsby? No, but it does matter if students know that

they have the ability to hope and accomplish their goals. They have the ability to read the world around them and influence it.

If nothing else, our call to action as those that are in English education and rural education is to support and empower rural students, never letting them forget that their words and stories have power to shape the world around them. In chapter 1, I put forward the question about who controls the narrative of what is rural. More simply put: who has the power? The story of rural does not have to be one haunted by ghosts or pawned off as the squeaky wheel, though we must never forget the previous chapters in a story and how they might impact how the plot progresses. Rural is in need of new authors. We must always remind our students that the one with the pen and the one with a voice is who crafts the story. When students audibly tell their story, they become the ones who control their own narrative.

Conclusion

I want to end with one more personal narrative that will enable me to come full circle with the importance of story. I was at my grandmother's house in rural Georgia. She had been lamenting the lackluster state of her prized hydrangea bushes over the past year. Unknowingly, when she removed the seemingly dead branches, she had pulled out the very places where eventually, with patience, new leaves and buds would begin to grow. She was shocked when she discovered the secret to reviving her hydrangeas: "Heather Lynn, those withered branches are where the new flowers are coming from! I just needed to give them a little love." When my grandmother removed the branches that appeared to have no chance at producing blooms, she discarded them, sealing their fate for a barren season. This season, she watched and nurtured the seemingly lifeless

branches and, much to her delight, was rewarded with fresh blooms.

My grandmother did not need to "fix" her hydrangea bushes. She simply needed to nurture the branches and blooms, allowing nature to take its course. Sometimes as teachers, we need to take a step back and simply listen. When we allow space for students to share and tell their own lived experiences, their autonomy inside and outside of the classroom can grow. When students know that they are listened to, valued, and seen, that positive mindset can be transformative in the way they view themselves and their potential.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Teacher Interview Protocol

Project Title: Supporting Rural Adolescent Voices in the Secondary English Language Arts Classroom

Teacher Interview Protocol

The purpose of this qualitative study is to examine ways teachers draw on the lived experiences of rural adolescent students in secondary English language arts classrooms as students make meaning with curriculum content. This study will use interviews, lesson plan collaboration sessions, classroom observations, and post-observation conferences review of lesson plans, interviews, and classroom observations as data. The study will take approximately three months. Data information gathered from this study is for research purposes only. ***No data gathered will be used for evaluation***.

Date:

Location:

Consent Form: Y/N

To help with my note taking and to ensure that I accurately write your responses, I would like to audiotape our conversation as indicated in the consent form we just discussed. Only the researcher on this project will have access to these recordings and the tapes will be erased upon the project's completion.

Do you feel comfortable with the consent form you signed?
Do you have any further questions about participating in this project?

I am attempting to learn more about the ways in which secondary English language arts teachers seek to support the voices of rural students in the classroom. Thank you for participating in this study. I have planned this interview to last an hour. During this time, I will ask you several questions to learn about your experiences. Please know that you are free to end the interview at any time.

Intake Interview Questions:

How long have you been teaching?
What is your interest in teaching rural students?
Do you identify yourself with being learning-centered?
In the past, how have you sought to support student voices in the classroom?

Can you tell me about a meaningful example of when you sought to support student voices in the classroom?
In the past, how have you been successful in supporting student voice in the classroom?
In the past, how have you struggled with supporting student voice in the classroom?
Can you tell me about a meaningful example?

Final Interview Questions:

Tell me about a lesson that you felt was successful.
Tell me about what you think made the lesson successful. How did you know?
Tell me about what goals you met.
Tell me about how you knew that the goals were met.
Tell me about a lesson you felt was not as successful. What made it feel this way to you?
Tell me about how student voices were supported in lessons.

Appendix B: Observation and Conference Protocol

Directions: The following form will be completed for each classroom observation and conference. Part A will be completed for the classroom observations and Part B will be completed for the conferences.

Part A: Classroom Observation

Date of Observation: Check: Electronic ___ or In Person____

Teacher Participant: School:

Class Observed: Number of Students:

Unit: Lesson:

How is the support of student voice being observed in the classroom?

How is a learning-centered stance being observed?

Part B: Observation Conference

Date of Conference: Check: Electronic ___ or In Person____

Tell me about what you felt the strengths of the lesson were.
Tell me about what you felt went well in the lesson.
Tell me about how you supported student voice in the lesson.
Tell me about what you would do differently.

Appendix C: Informed Consent

VIRGINIA POLYTECHNIC INSTITUTE AND STATE UNIVERSITY

Informed Consent for Participants

in Research Projects Involving Human Subjects

Title of Project: Supporting Rural Adolescent Voices in the Secondary English Language Arts Classroom

Investigator(s):	**Heather Lynn Wright**	**heatw18@vt.edu**
	Dr. Trevor Stewart, Ph.D.	**ttstew@vt.edu**

I. Purpose of this Research Project

The purpose of this qualitative study is to examine ways teachers draw on lived experiences of rural adolescent students in secondary English language arts classrooms as students make meaning with curriculum content. This study will use interviews, lesson plan collaboration sessions, classroom observations, and post-observation conferences review of lesson plans, interviews, and classroom observations as data. The study will take approximately three months. Data information gathered from this study is for research purposes only. ***No data gathered will be used for evaluation***.

II. Procedures

Should you agree to allow participation, your teachers will be asked to complete the following tasks:

- Two 60 minute interviews over the course of three months.
- Three collaborative lesson planning sessions over the course of three months.
- Three classroom observations and post-observation conferences over the course of three months.

III. Risks

There are limited physical and/or emotional risks associated with this project. Participants are answering interview questions regarding their classroom experiences and lesson plan implementation.

IV. Benefits

This research study provides the potential for benefits regarding adding to the body of knowledge of rural education.

V. Extent of Anonymity and Confidentiality

Data for this research study will be collected confidentially. Participants will be asked to identify the grade-level they teach or facilitate/coach as well as the academic level of their grade. While names, email addresses, and other identifiable information will be requested, they will not be communicated to any party beyond the researcher. At no time will the researcher release identifiable results of the study to anyone other than individuals working on the project without written consent of the participants.

Subjects will be assigned participant numbers as a means to distinguish them from one another. Data will be stored on a portable hard drive containing only the data from this study and secured in a locked file cabinet in a private residence in Blacksburg, Virginia.

Access to data will be limited to the researcher and study sponsor. Should a participating school desire study results, these will be made available upon request. Results given to schools will only include aggregated results with no identifying information included.

The Virginia Tech (VT) Institutional Review Board (IRB) may view the study's data for auditing purposes. The IRB is responsible for the oversight of the protection of human subjects involved in research.

VI. Compensation

No compensation is to be earned in this study.

VII. Freedom to Withdraw

It is important for you to know that you are free to withdraw from this study at any time without penalty. You are free not to answer any questions that you choose or respond to what is being asked of you without penalty.

Please note that there may be circumstances under which the investigator may determine that a subject should not continue as a subject.

Should you withdraw or otherwise discontinue participation, you will be compensated for the portion of the project completed in accordance with the Compensation section of this document.

VIII. Questions or Concerns

Should you have any questions about this study, you may contact one of the research investigators whose contact information is included at the beginning of this document.

Should you have any questions or concerns about the study's conduct or your rights as a research subject, or need to report a research-related injury or event, you may contact the VT IRB Chair, Dr. David M. Moore at moored@vt.edu or (540) 231-4991.

IX. Subject's Consent

I have read the Consent Form and conditions of this project. I have had all my questions answered. I hereby acknowledge the above and give my voluntary consent:

_____ Date_____

Subject signature

_____ Date _____

Subject printed name

-

(Note: each subject must be provided a copy of this form. In addition, the IRB office may stamp its approval on the consent document(s) you submit and return the stamped version to you for use in consenting subjects; therefore, ensure each consent document you submit is ready to be read and signed by subjects.)