Identity and Place:

Exploring the Complexities Between Rural Education, Community, and Queerness

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Manuscript Abstract

These combined manuscripts explore the intersections of rural education, community influences, and diverse identities by challenging rural monoliths and deficits while working to address opportunity gaps for rural youth and educators. Theories throughout this work include critical pedagogies of place (Bass & Azano, 2024; Greenwood, 2003), critical theories disrupting power (Freire, 1970), a pedagogy of love (Darder, 2017), and poetic explorations for a sense of belonging and a celebration of place (bell hooks, 2008; 2012) allowing for my own poetic voice to “cry out” (hooks, 2012, p. 12). The critical engagement with place norms and influences on identity development is further rooted in Queer studies, binding these manuscripts as a “tool of incessant unsettling” (Luciano & Chen, 2015, p. 192) by challenging the role of cis-heteronormativity (Berlant & Warner, 1995) in rural contexts. These combined manuscripts situate knowledge production and identity development in educational spaces in conversation with rural education, local and federal policies, issues of access, histories of erasure, and local and societal cis-heterosexual norms.

Literature informing these manuscripts focused on rural schools and the unique challenges embedded in those communities, such as rural poverty (Lewis & Boswell, 2020; Tieken, 2022), geographical inequities (Lichter et al., 2012; Showalter et al., 2023), fewer resources for Queer youth (Kosciw et al., 2022; Movement Advancement Project, 2019; Ramos et al., 2014), and limited enrichment opportunities (Azano et al., 2020; Callahan & Azano, 2019;

Rasheed, 2019), with a focus on how these challenges influence rural identities and widen opportunity gaps for rural learners. As a manuscript style dissertation, each manuscript centralizes parts of these theories and literatures. Manuscript 1 is a grounding theoretical piece that explores how Queer rural narratives are tangled in a spectrum of visibility. Manuscript 2 is a literature review that navigates how rural education and Queer identities have been discussed in research and reports. Manuscript 3 is a policy brief that presents a framework to critique federal and local anti-Queer policies and their influence on rural Queer youth and educators. Manuscript 4 is an empirical study exploring how rural youth explore their own sense of place and identity while attending a residential summer camp aimed to address an opportunity gap for rural gifted learners.

While each manuscript stands alone, combined, they present themes about (a) the internalizations and externalizations of rural identity, (b) the value of diverse rural representation, and (c) the influence of policy and place norms in rural schools. These manuscripts suggest the need to uplift vulnerable and historically marginalized narratives in rural schools in order to challenge rural monolithic narratives, the possibilities of alternative learning spaces to address opportunity gaps for Queer and gifted youth, and the hope for more safe spaces that celebrate diverse rural identities and experiences to increase authentic learning opportunities to celebrate place and self together.

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General Audience Abstract

This manuscript style dissertation explores rural education, community influences, and diverse, under-served rural populations. Each manuscript engages with issues of deficit narratives, addressing assumptions, and monolithic perspectives of rurality that widen opportunity gaps that allow for all rural youth to access authentic learning. The theoretical framings in the embedded manuscripts center a critical pedagogy of place (Greenwood, 2003), Queer studies (e.g., Berlant & Warner, 1995; Luciano & Chen, 2015,), critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970), and concepts of belonging (hooks, 2008, 2012). The four manuscripts address this central research topic by: (a) engaging with the role of visibility in rural spaces from Queer narratives; (b) exploring how research has discussed the intersections of rural education and Queerness in K-12 schools; (c) addressing anti-Queer policy implementation in rural schools; and (d) analyzing how rural, gifted learners explored their sense of place and identity at a summer enrichment experience designed to address an opportunity gap for rural, gifted learners. Overarching themes illuminate the importance in uplifting and celebrating diverse, rural experiences, especially Queer, to (re)root a sense of place value and authentic identity in a rural educational experience, which works to address educational opportunity gaps that uniquely influence rural youth while also challenging monolithic rural narratives.

Dedication

To Grandma Frances:

You taught me the value of community, the power of teaching, and the importance of care in educational work, but you probably remember it as a walk around the garden.

To rural, Queer youth:

You belong. You are unyielding. Your existence is resistance. My dream is that you get to live wildly and untamed. Listen to the Earth, they will be your first Queer friend.

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Throughout my journey from farm to dissertation, I have been fortunate enough to have an abundance of mentors and supporters.

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Attributions

This dissertation consists of four manuscripts where I have taken responsibility for primary authorship. Manuscript 1 began as a course project in my Queer theory class. After receiving feedback and the course concluding, I submitted the manuscript to a peer-reviewed journal, the *Journal of Theory and Practice in Rural Education,* where it is now published. Manuscript 2 is a literature review that served as my preliminary examination. The manuscript is currently under "revise and resubmit" with a peer-reviewed journal, the *Journal for Research in Rural Education*. Manuscript 3 is a co-authored policy brief published in *The Rural Educator.* Manuscript 4 is currently planned to be submitted to the *Journal of Advanced Academics*.

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When I first started writing poetry, I wrote it for my grandma who had recently passed away. I was grieving two losses: my grandmother and an imagined future self who most likely would never experience love. I took a creative writing class in high school that required only three new pages of writing every week to be workshopped on Friday. The three excerpted poems that follow capture my adolescent grief and fears.

Poem, 1 Fall 2012

the mask has been used to hide,
and to transform
People are judged
People who wear a mask
Hiding the pain,
trying to save people
From seeing their pain.
Paranoia sets in
they avoid the empathy
huge cracks become realized
fractures rising to break the
'Perfect mask'
a fake smile,
a fake 'hey,'
a fake hug
a fake life!
Hoping that one-day they will
figure out how to recover

Poem 2, Spring 2013

like a piano in decay
whose chords are struck
on the first warm day
as the warmth begins to spread
the tiny animals began to unite
they clean up the dead
and dance in the moonlight
everyone's muse would be hollow
without the piano's song

Poem 3, Spring 2013

My dear, your eyes look different today
they are glassy and blank
my dear, your eyes look lost today
lost in this artificial world, are you?

"Three new written pages every week" gave me permission to explore my sense of self and love of nature, while subtly documenting my feelings of being in the closet. The blank page became the space I felt safe enough to write about my depression, my necessity to hide who I was, and the solace that nature provided me. My authentic self finally had a space to exist. And, while I never openly expressed my sexuality in my writing in high school (for fear of the teacher reading those poems), I was addressing it daily. In the seventh grade, I asked my best friend, a girl, to fake date me to avoid getting called gay. I listened to community members talk about me having too much "suga" in my tank. I often heard the "f" slur and attended a southern Baptist church where the preacher talked about homosexuals going to hell. I constantly feared that anything happening at school would immediately get back to my grandma, who was previously an educator in the community for 30+ years. I wore Dixie Outfitters shirts because I thought if I could look more like a redneck, then nobody would think I was gay. My internalized homophobia led me to pronounce, "I don't care if they get married—just not in a church," in my high school political science class. When I was a freshman in college, my friends critiqued my dating history because during my eleventh and twelfth grade years, I would start dating a girl in February and then promptly end the relationship right after prom (mom wanted prom photos). Subtly, I was being socialized into cis-heterosexuality. As a closeted human for 23 years, I camouflaged myself in a place that consistently taught me being Queer is a problem. In fact, I had become comfortable with the plan for unaliving myself if anyone found out that I was gay.

The weight of searching for peace in myself and a place followed me through college and into my first year as a middle school teacher in a rural surrounding school. My first parent letter

home had a theme of *it's not about the destination, it's about the journey*, and I highlighted that my class was about finding ourselves through writing, reading, research, and each others' lived experiences. I wanted my students to bring their authentic-selves to their educational experiences. I received several donations aimed at helping build a diverse classroom library. During my short story unit, I found a story with two male characters kissing and wanted to use it to teach plot diagrams; my mentor teacher advised me not to. The students were still saying the same gay jokes that I heard in middle school; those were the echoes of my nightmares.

In the fall of my second year of teaching, I taught a seminar around themes of oppression, immigration, and love while reviewing literacy elements of memoir. Students remarked that they could not imagine a world not living where you want to live—or loving who you want to love. I was struck by their observations because that is the world I had assimilated into. That year, I slowly started coming out to friends, family, and co-workers. I gradually came out to my students. And that summer, I came out to my parents who responded: *We love you but do not accept that lifestyle*. (We are still working on it.) A few weeks later, I posted an unconditional acceptance post on my social media (excerpt below).

> *"I'm writing this for the kids still unsure of who they are. The ones that haven't seen themselves in the LGBTQ+ community so they don't know if how they feel is okay. The kids who have convinced themselves, like me, that who you want to love is wrong. The ones standing at the altar of their faith and their heart. And the humans with a gun next to their head about to choose death because love isn't accepted by all…I know writing this feels like the episode of Grey's Anatomy when the man was trapped in cement. Apparently, it caused him more pain to have the cement lift off his body than it did while encased. Yet, he was being saved." (7/7/2019)*

As an openly Queer educator, I continued to include diverse voices in my curriculum and provided students space to just write. During this time, many students came out through their writings; they read and wrote stories with Queer characters during choice reading; and they naturally talked about their own identities (including gender and sexuality) during class discussions. Yet, this journey also had its share of challenges. One colleague told me, *I enjoy working with you, but really don't agree with your lifestyle.* A student walked out of my class and stated, *I will not be taught by a gay teacher.* Those examples are overwhelmingly outweighed by students and parents who valued my instructional choices. I credit my teaching and, specifically, my students, for providing space to hold my Queer identity. And, perhaps, getting to be a more authentic educator made me a better teacher. However, between the COVID-19 pandemic, the vast anti-Queer policies being developed in public education, and the extremist conservative groups targeting Queer educators, the space I thought was safe for me eventually pushed me out of teaching middle school. I left teaching to pursue my doctoral degree with the hope of employing advocacy and effecting change through scholarship.

In this manuscript-style dissertation, I intertwine poetry and academic voice to honor writing as an act of healing, hope, and – for some – liberation. bell hooks (2012) notes, "poems are a place where we can cry out" (p. 7). The personal poetry allows for my own subjectivities while engaging with research and analysis. Part of this work is to disrupt monolithic rural narratives and queering the types of written narratives (e.g., poetry) valued in this space. Poetry offers a brief entrance into a safe writing space for me to engage with this work that is deeply rooted in my own lived experiences.

seek a place
where your skin finally
melts into the comfort

of supportive bones

move the soles
of our feet
against hollowed
holes of potential love
tracing memories
like it was yesterday

the journey to find
self, love, and place

The purpose of situating these artifacts and memories within this manuscript-style dissertation is to not only consider my insider role within these various manuscripts, but also to emphasize how I come to this work with a goal to center hope, love, and joy (Darder, 2017; Freire, 1992) in order to flatten hierarchies of power (Freire, 1970) while highlighting bright spaces that allow youth to explore their authentic identities and places.

Defining Key Terms

Broadly speaking, my scholarship explores intersectional work in rural education with a primary focus on Queerness in K-12 spaces. In the first three manuscripts, Queerness presents prominently in the work. The final manuscript (manuscript 4 primary research) allows me to consider broad identity development when exploring the influence of rurality and place; Queer salience is embedded within this manuscript because of the ways it created and dismantled place binaries to challenge rural monolithic narratives. Here, I provide context and operational definitions for rurality and Queerness because I am interested in how place norms influence identity, specifically in how rurality may influence and shape Queer identities, and what gets queered in rural communities. Valentine (2002) explains,

> Social categories (such as class, gender, sexuality and race) are no longer taken for granted as given or fixed but rather are understood as socially produced through

> processes of negotiation and contestation and as such are recognised to be multiple and fluid. In the same way, space is also no longer understood as having particular fixed characteristics. Nor is it regarded as being merely a backdrop for social relations, a pre-existing terrain which exists outside of, or frames, everyday life. Rather, space is understood to play an active role in the constitution and reproduction of social identities and, vice versa, social identities, meanings and relations are recognised as producing material and symbolic or metaphorical spaces (para 3).

Rurality and Queerness, both operate as socially constructed identities in states of flux and negotiation.

Defining Queer and Queerness as Identity [1]

Queerness is used as an umbrella term that includes any gender or sexual identity that is not part of the dominant cis-heteronormative sexual culture. Queerness encompasses gay, lesbian, transgender, bisexual, asexual, pansexual, intersex, non-binary, two-spirited, and questioning. Dyer (2017) explains that the term *Queer* allows people to “account for children’s deviances from normativity” (p. 293). When using the term *Queer*, it is not to generate a blanket monolithic narrative of a singular Queer experience. By using the term *Queer*, it must be acknowledged how race, gender, age, socio-economic status, able-ness, and place can generate more or less privilege within the Queer community. For example, a white, rural, middle class, cis-gay man (like me) may have, and most likely does have, a completely different experience than a Black, middle-class, non-rural, trans woman. Cis-heterosexual privileges function to help reproduce cis-heteronormativity.

[1] These terms are adapted from a section of my original literature review; however, it was removed from Manuscript 2 based on reviewer comments

Queerness also comes with a long history of trauma where "queer" was frequently used as an offensive phrase. The history of the term cannot be lost because it guides the current understanding of who uses that term and how that term is being operationalized. For some, LGBTQ+ may not accurately describe the complex web of intersections that happen with gender and sexual orientation expression. Conversely, many who are lesbian or gay, for example, may not identify as Queer. I choose the term Queer, however, because it best encompasses the spectrum that is both gender and sexual identities while recognizing that I am situated within this particular understanding of its meaning and that other terms may be suitable in the application or understanding of this work now or in the future. I also use it to consider Queer and nonnormative identities being cast against a dominate, cis-heteronormative society.

Gender and Sexuality

Importantly, in scholarship, *gender* and *sexuality* must be clearly defined in order to resist the assumption that *gender* and *sexuality* are directly informing each other. Given the social justice in education focus, I refer to Catalano and Shlasko's (2010) "Introduction" to the "Transgender Oppression" section of the second edition of *Reading for Diversity and Social Justice.* Their work in unpacking Queer terminology is rooted in the context of politics, histories, health, and a hope for liberation which is connected to this work on Queerness in rural schools.

Catalano and Shlasko (2010) define *sex* as "biological factors, such as chromosomes, genitals, and hormone levels, that are used to categorize people male or female," (p. 424) while also acknowledging more possibilities exist like intersex humans. *Gender*, however, is more involved in the "range of social/cultural meanings" that society has "ascribed to biological sex" (p. 424). *Gender* can be articulated through the form of gender identity (internal self-concept) and gender expression (behaviors, language, expression).

Catalano and Shlasko (2010) define *sexuality/sexual orientation* as concerned with the "gender/s one is emotionally, romantically, or sexually attracted to" (p. 424). It is also acknowledged that a person can see someone as attractive and not be interested in them sexually or emotionally. Galbraith (2022) wrote, "I primarily use the word queer to reference an understanding of sexuality and identity rooted in nonnormativity" (p. 171). Therefore, *gender* and *sexuality* are situated within the ways in which the term Queerness disrupts normativity by highlighting that gender and sexual identity development are not the same as non-Queer gender and sexual identities. A simple (if not obvious) example is that cis-heterosexual people never have to go through the process of "coming out." This example, in itself, serves to address how identities are often constructed through social, perhaps also, place-based, norms.

Defining Rural as Place

In this definition, I take a broad approach to defining *rural* because the studies and conceptual pieces reviewed have varied definitions. It has been difficult to generate a single definition for *rurality* because *place* is not a fixed idea (Isserman, 2005). There are various government entities and policymakers' definitions that label *rural* spaces through the lens of population, leaning more quantitively, such as the Census Bureau, Rural-Urban Density Typology, United States Department of Agriculture (USDA ERS), Rural Urban Continuum, University System Class definition, and the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES; Dunstan et al., 2021); however, these models fail to address some of their own limitations such as an urban-normative or metrocentric bias. For example, many of these models base their definitions of *rurality* on a locale's population and its proximity to urban spaces. An empirical study in education might define rurality based on a specific school using the NCES codes. Table

1 illustrates how NCES rural locale codes rely on an urban-centric classification system (Longhurst, 2021).

Table 1

NCES Locale Classifications for Rural Spaces

Fringe	"Census-defined rural territory that is less than or equal to 5 miles from an urbanized area, as well as rural territory that is less than or equal to 2.5 miles from an urban cluster" (NCES*)*
Distant	"Census-defined rural territory that is more than 5 miles but less than or equal to 25 miles from an urbanized area, as well as rural territory that is more than 2.5 miles but less than or equal to 10 miles from an urban cluster" (NCES*)*
Remote	"Census-defined rural territory that is more than 25 miles from an urbanized area and is also more than 10 miles from an urban cluster" (NCES*)*

Note: Subcategories focus on rural contexts and definitions are provided by the NCES. Quoted from the National Center for Educational Statistics: 2022. https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/annualreports/topical-studies/locale/definitions

While a school could be labeled rural *remote*, *fringe*, or *distant*, that school may be an anomaly in an otherwise suburban or urban district. These definitions matter because they are used in educational research to describe rural schools, influence federal funding decisions, and may shift community culture. Longhurst (2021) states, "When a setting is described as rural, but rural is left underdefined or undertheorized, it leaves the reader to rely on their own conceptions of rurality" (p. 16). If underdefined or undertheorized, rural may be latched on to other variables that are not explicitly a rural salient issue. By exploring how the terms *rurality* and *Queerness* are operationalized within this manuscript-style dissertation, I argue that there is rural Queer

salience embedded throughout these manuscripts focused on rural education, and that it is not just Queerness that happens to be in a rural space.

Rural identity has been explored in a variety of contexts; mostly, through a deficit lens, ruralness has been constructed as a place of backward temporality (Crawford, 2017), including lack of resources (Provasnik et al., 2007) and monolithic conservative values (Carter & Borch, 2005). Embedded in rural spaces are schools that often reflect local cultural norms (Azano, 2011) while creating social places for students to form their gender and/or sexual identity (Pascoe, 2012; Thorne, 1993). Therefore, rurality may be explored in a study through population density models or through methods in which local values/norms are created within that space. In this sense, *rurality* could have rich spaces of nature, close-knit community values, and/or even generational land values.

There are also more nuanced definitions. In Azano's (2019) poem titled, "Defining Rural," back porches, Nanny's name, wood stoves, a threat of a fly swatter, and the "golden and green and blue in the valley" (p. 219) are all images, experiences, and symbols that defined Azano's definition of rural. This definition of rurality based on Azano's stories of place hint at the influences of fewer people, tighter social relations, and agrarian discourses. This also begins to present the role of social identifiers used to describe rural people and how these experiences can connect us to various discourse communities. In Manuscript 2, I briefly explore how the selected articles relied heavily on adjectives such as conservative, evangelical, religious, older populations, and poor to describe rurality. Longhurst (2021) argues, "Rural education research exists at complex intersections of human development, space and place, culture, pedagogy, demography, and geography" (p. 16). This fluidity of defining rural illustrates how rurality becomes defined through various identity markers and experiences.

Connections to Literature

My experiences as a Queer rural educator are reflected in the limited research presently available about Queer experiences in rural schools. These connections to literature are focused on place [rurality] and identity [Queer] development in educational spaces.

Rural and Queer Youth

Longitudinal data provided by the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) illustrates, as compared to urban counterparts, that rural Queer youth face more victimization (physical/verbal), fewer resources, and more anti-Queer policies (Kosciw et al., 2022; Kosciw et al., 2020; Kosciw et al., 2018). Rural Queer youth are less likely to be exposed to visible Queer-affirming curricula (Page, 2017) and teachers rarely intervened when harassment took place (Palmer et al., 2012). While those challenges were also present in Gray's (2009) *Out in the Country,* Gray's study illustrates how Queer youth persist and attempt to thrive in their rural communities. This focus on rural Queer youth is critical because as, Showalter and colleagues (2019) argue, one in five youth attend a rural school and those schools are directly influenced by disproportionate funding. Anti-Queer policies uniquely affect rural schools because of the assumptions of parent-centric values and potential to further erase Queerness from existence in rural communities (Whitten & Thomas, 2023). Moreover, safety, family values, usage of technology, and religious ideologies remain variables that rural Queer youth navigate (Wike et al., 2021). This web of feeling whether or not school is safe enough for Queer rural youth to *be* their authentic-selves connects to school-to-prison pipelines (Meiners, 2016; Snapp et al., 2015) and the higher rates of suicide amongst Queer youth (Johns et al., 2020).

Manuscript 2, “Queerness in Rural Schools a Literature Review” expands more on how research and reports have described how rurality and Queerness intersect in K-12 settings–which has connections to rural Queer youth.

Visibility of Queer Culture in Rural Communities

Reviewing narratives of rural Queer adults (e.g., *Country Queers* podcast*)* provides a glimpse into conversations on visibility, community, and access to resources, and how those elements of visibility may influence educational experiences and senses of belonging. Queer visibility is more likely in urban spaces than in rural spaces; for example, urban spaces may have rainbow flags in their coffee shops, an entire Pride festival in their city, or a gayborhood. Rural Queer visibility is met with more caution (Whitten, 2023) to balance personal comfort levels, histories of overkilled violence while lacking positive histories of being Queer in a rural space, and the delicate process of the forming and negotiating identity centered in place (Whitten, 2023). Commonly perceived rural social identifiers (i.e., as conservative, cis-heterosexual, Christian, older-aged, and White) provide a window into analyzing community values systems and the importance of critiquing monolithic rural narratives. Wike and colleagues (2021) noted in their study, after interviewing 11 rural LGBTQ-identifying youth, “All participants described…that anti-LGBTQ+ sentiment driven by this religious influence served as the foundation for many challenges that they experienced, including coming to terms with their own LGBTQ+ identities” (p. 16). In small communities that highly value religious and conservative political values, public schools become places where those values are recycled.

Schools are a site of gender and sexual identity development (Pasco, 2007; Thorne, 1993), and cis-heterosexual values have the potential to be replicated under the umbrella of conservative Christian values. For example, *Virginia’s Model Policy on Ensuring Privacy,*

Dignity, and Respect for All Students and Parents in Virginia's Public Schools (2023), is often consistently discussed within the same breath of parental values. However, those parental values not only assume neutrality of caregivers and family values (Mayo, 2021), but the policy also fails to involve Queer parents and parents of Queer youth (see Manuscript 3). According to the Movement Advancement Project's LGBTQ report (2019), there are "fewer alternatives in the face of discrimination" (p. iv) within rural spaces. In other words, even Queer-affirming professionals and businesses, while supportive, may still be limited with available resources to support Queerness in rural spaces. Another example of fewer alternatives is the access to Queer-affirming healthcare, which was seen when comparing urban and rural school nurses; rural school nurses had fewer opportunities for continuing education to help with LGBTQ+ youth (Ramos et al., 2014).

Concepts of visibility, access, and the ways communities build up or break down certain identities naturally present themselves in rural schools. Schools in rural communities often are called the heart of the community (Tieken, 2014). While these variables do challenge rural Queer narratives, it must also be highlighted that rural spaces are inherently Queer spaces. The very notion of sustainability, anti-capitalism, and space to be yourself away from others is Queer. Rural being an inherently Queer space was inspired during a paper session on Queer farmers in Appalachia at the interdisciplinary Appalachian Studies Conference in spring 2023. Schwamberger (2023) described how her participants noted that on their farms they are not judged for what they wear and how the nature of living off the land gave them a greater sense of liberation.

This contrasts with the common narrative of Queer out-migration from rural spaces to urban spaces because they feel more *seen* or *safer* in urban spaces. However, the urban-centric

spaces may feel more *controlling* or *codependent,* which may cause Queer people to seek out rural spaces. Yet, even this binary is still not inclusive of the entirety of rural Queer livelihood (e.g., the Queer city cow-boys/girls/theys); therefore, it is important to consider Biddle and colleagues (2019) concept of resisting awayness which says there is rural salience in urban spaces and vice versa while also acknowledging the temporal flux of place. In other words, there is rural Queer salience in urban spaces, which must also be included when considering equity of rural Queer voices.

Rural Queer Educators

Another facet of this manuscript-style dissertation is to support and celebrate Queer educators and educators who are Queer advocates within their rural schools and communities. In the school district I previously taught in, I personally know at least one Queer educator who has left teaching each year since 2019. Across the nation, teachers are being criticized and doxed for teaching Critical Race Theory, gender and sexuality, and social and emotional learning because they are considered examples of liberal “wokeness.” Even before the current hostile Queer educator witch hunt, Fredman and colleagues (2015) addressed fears of community, administration, and parental backlash, noting concern for “the degree to which incorporating LGBTQ topics may have an impact on how they complete their job duties” (p. 77). This is especially important in rural communities. In an online survey study, Page (2017) noted, as compared to urban counterparts, rural educators felt less comfortable incorporating and discussing Queer literature. This may be reflected in how rural educators also describe being less aware of Queer educational resources and how they felt they may get in trouble if they made those curricula choices (Page, 2017). This was further explored from an administrative perspective in a study by Bishop and McClellan (2016) that looked at rural principals’

perceptions of LGBTQ students. One conclusion from the study explained that while principals loved each student, they often "did not believe in 'the student's lifestyle'" (p. 144), and they subtly hinted at ways for students to blend in, leading to "what sounded a lot like 'don't come out' to us" (p. 144). These moments of tension and discomfort are highlighted in Shelton's (2022) study in which her participants navigate relationships with administrators and the community by being a visible LGBTQ+ teacher ally. However, Shelton argues, because of her participants' narratives, "[participant] emphasizes the necessity of more nuanced considerations on how rural queer pedagogies and LGBTQ+ positive efforts might look and work in rural settings" (p. 192). Queer educators in rural areas and educators who are interested in LGBTQ+ ally work exist, must be met where they are with resources, and be given additional educational outlets to support rural students when policies inhibit support and conversation.

Schools, and even educators, are vessels for gender and sexuality understandings and what gets 'normed' in the community because they are spaces that indirectly or directly communicate which identities get to exist. For example, proms may allow for cis-heterosexual couples to exist loudly, while banning a same-sex couple from attending. Moreover, schools are a place where youth explore various ways to engage in gender play (Thorne, 1993); however, if communities and schools assume all teachers' genders and sexualities as cis-heterosexual, then it has the potential to erase Queer livelihood both in school and in the community, which contributes to rural deficit thinking when considering why rural diversity matters (Azano et al., 2021; Crumb et al., 2022). For instance, a rural educator may talk about how gender play was normalized during Shakespearean plays (e.g., young boys performed the female parts) but in their classroom they may only reinforce a strict gender binary (e.g., "this is a book for boys").

This type of erasure is connected to power, who fully gets to exist in society, and which knowledge is valued (Freire, 1970). Blackburn and Pennell (2018) argued,

> Regardless of the age of the students, though, educators have a responsibility to teach about gender and sexuality. Heteronormativity has to do with both — not just the assumption that the only "normal" thing is for, say, girl babies to become women, wear women's clothes, and behave in feminine ways but also that they must be sexually attracted to men. (p. 31)

This backdrop of literature leads to the following questions:

- How do assumptions of gender and sexuality uphold monolithic narratives of rural identities and how can disrupting those assumptions help to close opportunity gaps for rural Queer youth (and educators) to engage in authentic teaching and learning?
- How are place and identity co-constructed through local and societal norms and how can queering a space uplift all educators and students in rural places? If these binaries, monolithic narratives, and assumptions are disrupted, will rural youth (and educators) feel more like their authentic selves in educational learning environments?

Queer rural educators exist alongside Queer students, administrators, aides, bus drivers, custodians, counselors, administrative assistants, and food providers; however, the assumption of gender and sexuality neutrality risks erasing Queer lives from the opportunity to thrive.

Overview of Manuscripts

The introduction of this manuscript-style dissertation serves as an overview of how the four manuscripts work together to advance research in rural education, specifically addressing Queer identity development in rural schools and communities. Each of the manuscripts works toward understanding more about rural education, community influences, and diverse identities

in educational spaces by addressing issues of rural monolithic narratives, disrupting cis-hetero-metronormativity, and engaging with a sense of belonging. The first manuscript is a theoretical article that focuses on the role of Queer visibility in rural spaces, published in the *Journal of Theory and Practice in Rural Education* (see Whitten, 2023). The second manuscript, a literature review originally written for my preliminary exam, explores the intersections of Queerness and rurality in K-12 spaces and is currently with a "revise and resubmit" with the *Journal for Research in Rural Education* (<14% acceptance rate). The third manuscript, a co-authored policy brief, focuses on anti-Queer policy implementation in rural schools, was published in *The Rural Educator* (see Whitten & Thomas, 2023*)*. The three aforementioned manuscripts are published or under review in the three leading academic peer-reviewed journals in the subfield of rural education. The final manuscript for this dissertation is a research study exploring how a group of middle school learners expressed their sense of identity and place when given various place-based enrichment opportunities at a week-long residential camp. The study has Queer salience because of the way in which it potentially may disrupt monolithic identities of rural youth. Moreover, assuming that Queerness, visible or not, exists in all educational spaces, rural research addressing identity may have inherent Queer salience.

As a rural education scholar, I want to know how rural students describe their own identities and values when given a place-based humanities curriculum and how their narratives may challenge rural stereotypes. When tasked with developing my own primary research, I wanted to focus on rurality and identity through the craft of writing and art. This was presented as a Queer writing group during my preliminary exam. However, with my time helping to co-develop and coordinate a residential summer enrichment experience, I realized that my curriculum was already allowing students to consider their identities in connection to place. A

thank you card colored in rainbow font from a first-year camper which said, "Clint, or Queen, it was great being at camp. Hope you have nice life. [Signed their name][2] P.S. I love your shirts" reminded me that a few kids had already been writing about their Queer ruralness at camp. Each day that week, I had worn a shirt that subtly signaled Queer visibility. While my primary research manuscript does not seek to find Queerness, I wonder what identities may exist brightly in rural spaces when given the opportunity and how those identities challenge a rural monolithic narrative.

Each of these manuscripts focused on the idea of who we are and where we get to be ourselves, feel safe, and be a part of various intersecting communities. From a Queer studies perspective, these manuscripts challenge the role of norms and seek to disrupt monolithic narratives in rural schools and communities. Whereas, from a place-based approach, these manuscripts center how to leverage place to explore identity within education.

Manuscript 1: Exploring the Role of Visibility in Rural Queer Narratives (Theoretical)

The purpose of this manuscript was to explore the role of visibility based on rural Queer narratives and how the function of a spectrum of visibility influences rural Queer youth and educators. After situating the introduction within the climate of public gun violence towards visibly Queer spaces (e.g., Club Q in Colorado) and policies calling for the removal of Pride symbols in schools, I consider three objects of study to explore the role of visibility in narratives that focus on the interesting Queer and rural identities. The objects of study in this manuscript are as follows: (a) Grounding Research Text: *Out in the Country* by Mary Gray (2009) and *Men in Place* by Miriam Abelson (2019); (b) *Country Queers* podcast; and (c) Violent Place Histories, such has Brandon Teena and Matthew Shepard. After analyzing these narratives, I

[2] They had a different name list on their caregiver paperwork but wished to be called this name at camp.

developed four themes. The first theme centered on how rural Queer people work to preserve a sense of comfort when considering Queer visibility in their rural spaces. The second theme explores how spaces get produced as a binary; whereas, rural Queers generate new, third spaces to engage with identity development. The third theme engages with the fluidity in identity work, which is connected to the fluidity of place as well; in other words, rural Queer narratives point towards balancing two intersecting identities (rural and Queer) and having to suppress one identity to allow for the other one to be protected. The final theme present is the influence of histories of violence on rural Queer identities. This theme highlights how the impact of the most famous stories of rural Queer people (Brandon Teena and Matthew Shepard) having been overkilled (Stanley, 2021) influences rural Queer youth and communities.

Following the thematic discussion, I provide three educational implications for practitioners:

(a) *Increase Visibility*: all rural schools will have Queer people in them; therefore, policymakers, caregivers, and educators must assume Queer-affirming resources and spaces are needed in all rural schools ("no monolithic way to *see* rural Queerness" (p. 46);

(b) *Addressing Bias*: rural schools should work to address cis-heterosexual bias in their practices and policies; and

(c) *Creating Inherently Safe Spaces:* a variety of resources can aid in increasing Queer-affirming spaces (online resources, curricula choices, organizations, Pride symbols).

The study concludes by calling into action a consideration of a spectrum of Queer visibility in rural spaces in order to move past binaries of "visible" or "invisible," "out" or "closeted," and "seen" or "unseen."

Whitten, C. (2023). Everywhere and nowhere…all at once: Exploring the role of visibility in rural Queer narratives. *Theory & Practice in Rural Education*, *13*(1), 33–51. https://doi.org/10.3776/tpre.2022.v13n1p33-51

Manuscript 2: Queerness in Rural Schools (Literature Review)

The purpose of this literature review is to explore how empirical studies, including national survey reports, describe the intersections of Queerness and rurality in K-12 schools. The conceptual framework followed a Queer studies perspective in order to understand how gender, sexual norms, and values get reproduced in rural schools under the societal value of cis-heterosexuality. I performed a systematic search through several databases of peer-reviewed articles; additionally, I allowed three research-based reports from the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) because of the longitudinal data it provided. Thirteen articles met the search criteria. Those articles were analyzed using guiding questions adapted from Hallinger's (2014) process for review, alongside my conceptual framework lens.

After analysis, I developed three thematic categories: (a) Evidence of victimization and safety challenges for Queer rural youth; (b) Attitudes of educators prevalent in the research about Queerness in rural schools; and (c) Rural school resources and Queer identity. Within the reflection, there is a call to action by addressing regional cis-heteronormativity in order to consider which gender and sexual identities get to exist and/or have existed in rural spaces.

Whitten, C. (Revise and resubmit). Queerness in rural schools: A literature review exploring the intersections of rurality and queerness in k-12 schools. *Journal of Research in Rural Education.*

Manuscript 3: Anti-Queer Policy & Rural Schools (Practitioner Focused)

The purpose of the policy brief was to critique three assumptions of anti-Queer policies and how those policies influence Queerness in rural schools:

(a) *Does the policy make assumptions on one type of parent?* If the policy only values cis-heterosexual, nuclear families, it risks erasing rural Queer families from the conversation. In other words, anti-Queer policies should be analyzed, especially in rural spaces, to address how all parents'/caregivers' voices are considered within parent-centric, anti-Queer policies;

(b) *How does the policy define gender and sexual identities*? Anti-Queer policies impact all genders and sexualities; however, lack of definitions and contradictory policies uniquely influence rural schools who may have overworked faculty or fewer Queer-affirming resources; and

(c) *Will the policy erase rural Queer educators and students?* If the policies create fear around Queer inclusive curriculum, remove Pride symbols from schools, and even challenges with athletic teams and extracurriculars, Queer livelihood is at risk of being erased from rural schools that may already not have as many visible resources.

The goal of the conclusion of this manuscript is that "rural Queer-identifying youth, educators, caregivers, community members and Queer-affirming allies, and advocates can challenge anti-Queer policies and (re)exist fully in rural schools" (p. 76).

Whitten, C., & Thomas, C. (2023). Anti-Queer policy & rural schools: A framework to analyze anti-Queer policy implementation in rural schools. *The Rural Educator, 44*(2), 73-76. https://doi.org/10.55533/2643-9662.1408

Manuscript 4: Identity and Place Through Enrichment Programs (Primary Research)

The purpose of this manuscript is to analyze how a group of rural middle school students describe their identities and sense of place during a place-based, summer enrichment program. The literature review is split into three sections: (a) rural gifted learners, (b) identity, rurality, and place, and (c) summer programs as alternative learning environments for rural students. Critical

place-based pedagogy (Gruenewald, 2003), externalization and internalizations of place—P/place and p/place (Bass & Azano, 2024), and hooks' (2012) poetic sense of belonging, informed by *Appalachian Elegy,* served as the conceptual framework for this study. This study uses a case study approach to explore a summer enrichment camp for gifted, rural sixth and seventh graders from varying rural districts as they navigate various humanities place-based activities. As an active researcher participant, I collected fieldnotes, artistic artifacts, and curriculum frameworks; artifacts were collected for two summers. All data were initially reviewed inductively, and then I used extreme sampling to select exemplar artifacts that illuminated the developing themes from first pass. The twenty-two exemplar artifacts highlight three themes from the data:

(a) *Rural identity expressed as ecological cosmopolitanism*—the campers were deeply engaged with preserving nature centric imagery;

(b) *Campers explore rural plurality: foraging through the here and there*—campers created and complicated dichotomies of place that worked to disrupt rural monolithic narratives; and

(c) *Allusions illustrate rural literacies and anchors of place*—campers highlighted their rural discourse communities through place narratives, symbols, and affective connections to their rural communities.

These findings suggest the importance of creating place-based spaces that celebrate and affirm rural identities and communities which allows campers to value their own rural selves and homes. My goal is to publish this manuscript in the gifted education journal, *Journal of Advanced Academics*, to ensure that this research and implications for place and identity go beyond rural education audiences.

Connections between Manuscripts

Each of these manuscripts addresses opportunity gaps for rural youth, with strong implications on how those gaps influence identities, including Queer identities, in rural communities. These manuscripts together seek to advance research on rural Queer identities in K-12 schools by working to close rural opportunity gaps and provide ways to promote a variety of rural identities within curricula, policy, and outreach. The manuscripts weave together Queer identities in rural education, community norms influence on identity, and how Queerness is navigated and negotiated in rural educational spaces. The goal of my future scholarship is to (re)root Queer hope, love, and joy within rural schools and communities. That said, I understand how this research is situated in the current hostile socio-political climate for Queer individuals in education. After facing numerous challenges working with colleagues in a different research study to get a voluntary survey out to English teachers in rural schools (Thompson et al., 2024), it is critical that we explore alternative educational spaces and how those spaces grant a new possibility and perspective on identity exploration while also seeing it as a way to Queer and (re)root education in authenticity of self and place. In other words, if anti-Queer policies continue to erase Queerness from schools and make schools unsafe for Queer research, how can weekend enrichment programs and summer camps become new educational spaces where youth and educators can feel like their authentic selves belong and their places are valued? These manuscripts acknowledges that when we love our places, we must hold them accountable (Darder, 2017). In sum, these manuscripts work towards creating safe, authentic educational spaces that allow educators, youth, and community members to celebrate rural education while also addressing the challenges that uniquely influence rural Queer existence.

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

Clint Whitten, *Virginia Tech*

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

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

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

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

A visible domestic terrorist targets a visible Queer public space.

Raymond Green Vance (he/him)

Kelly Loving (she/her)

Daniel Aston (he/him)

Derrick Rump (he/him)

Ashley Paugh (she/ her)

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

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

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

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

Defining Terms

Rurality

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

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

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

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

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

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

Queerness

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

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

Visibility

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

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

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

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

Theoretical Grounding

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Objects of Study

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

Grounding Research Texts

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

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

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

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

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

Country Queers

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

Violent Place Histories'

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

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

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

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

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

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

Emerging Themes: Spectrum of Visibility

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

Preserving Comfort

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Production of Spaces

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Identity Work in Rural Queerness

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Fears and Spaces of Violence

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

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

Implications for Educational Spaces

Increase Visibility

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

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

Addressing Bias

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

Creating Inherently Safe Spaces

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

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

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

Discussion

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

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

Conclusion

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

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

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

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Queerness in Rural Schools

A Literature Review Exploring the Intersections of Rurality and Queerness in K-12 Schools

Abstract

Given recent anti-Queer legislation across the nation and the decade-long gap since Mary Gray's (2009) *Out in the Country,* this literature review aims to describe the intersections of Queerness and rurality in K-12 educational spaces. Queer studies provide a conceptual framework to analyze the selected articles, alongside Hallinger's (2014) process for review. Based on the search criteria, 10 peer-reviewed empirical journal articles were selected from 2012-2022; additionally, three reports from the Gay Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) were included because of the longitudinal data that they provide in an already emerging field. The selected articles were analyzed for rural and Queer salience and how the studies discuss the intersection of Queerness and rurality in education. From the analysis, I developed three themes related to victimization and safety, teacher and administrator attitudes, and school-provided Queer resources. This literature review provides a systematic review of the challenges, experiences, and opportunities related to the intersection of rural education and Queerness.

Key Terms: *Queer, LGBTQ+, rural, k-12 schools, victimization, attitudes, resources*

Queerness in Rural Schools

A Literature Review Exploring the Intersections of Rurality and Queerness in K-12 Schools

One of the grounding studies around Queer rural youth is Mary Gray's book, *Out in the Country* (2009). Since its publication, Queerness in rural contexts has remained a relatively underexplored area with relatively few exceptions. Gray's study acted as "the first contemporary ethnographic study of queer rural life in the United States" (p. 9) and highlights the influences of visibility, emerging access to the internet, and the role of community in identity formation. Through narratives that Gray collected, rurality and Queerness were intersecting identities that also faced levels of harassment. For example, Gray described Shaun and his friends who, after posting photos of themselves performing in Drag at the local Walmart, received verbal harassment both in person and online, prompting them to remove their online existence in fear that "...strangers might happen to find photos and zero in on the HPA [Highland Pride Alliance] as an easy target" (p. 116). Gray also found that community pushback was a prominent factor at the intersection of rurality and Queerness. This was illuminated in Boyd County, Kentucky, when a group came together to form a Gay-Straight Alliance, a nonacademic club, which received negative feedback based on "...the politics of LGBT visibility in rural communities" (p. 63). Lastly, Gray highlighted the rural struggle of exploring gender and sexuality while also intersecting with other marginalized identities. Gray stated, "Until recently, Brandon felt his bisexuality was incommensurate with his racial identity. John W. questions whether his identification with bondage [kink] fits with his understanding of 'gay'" (p. 138). This study and its findings provide an example of the importance of the intersections of rurality and Queerness in the context of educational spaces as well, while also illuminating how rural Queer youth are finding ways to be resilient.

The moments that Gray (2009) presented from rural Queer youth represent a sort of harm that exists as both macro and micro aggressions, which illustrate not only how rural Queer individuals are personally expressing themselves but also how those individuals see others in the community respond to Queerness. The significance of marginalizing Queerness is painfully evident in the larger history of Queer individuals being “overkilled” (Stanley, 2021). Stanley (2021) argues, “Overkill is a term used to indicate such excessive violence that it pushes the body beyond death” (p. 33). The murders of two Queer young people, Brandon Teena and Matthew Shepard, both brutally murdered in rural communities, serve as painful reminders of rurality being part of the narrative of overkill. Their lived narratives were the target of murderers seeking to end their “trans/queer life itself” (Stanley, 2021, p. 33), not just a life. After being raped, Brandon Teena (1972-1993), a transgender man in rural Nebraska, was overkilled by two men in the community. A few years later, Matthew Shepard (1976-1998), an openly gay man in rural Wyoming, was beaten and tied to a fence. Both stories were brought into conversation during Gray’s (2009) study and Abelson’s (2019) *Men in place: Trans masculinity, race, and sexuality in America*. While there are spaces that celebrate acceptance of Queer identities and lives in rural spaces such as the *Country Queers* podcast/website, these two largely public narratives exhume a fear around the histories of rural Queer bodies.

Rurality is especially important when exploring Queer identity because rural spaces have a higher chance of having less visible Queer-affirming spaces and fewer Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer (LGBTQ) resources, including access to health care (Abelson, 2019; Gray 2009). While not mentioned in Abelson and Gray, this acronym should be updated to be inclusive of Intersex, Asexual, and Two-Spirited (LGBTQIA2S+[3]) people who also face issues

[3] LGBTQIA2S+ is a term inclusive of Indigenous cultures that have long acknowledged the spectrum of gender and sexual identities.

with resources and health care. Rural people often deal with geographical/socio-cultural periphery and societal stereotype threats (Peine et al., 2022; Wray, 2006), which influence policy and politics that often prove to be a disadvantage for rural people (Azano, 2019). The importance of place is centralized in Brenner's (2021) discussion of a rural critical policy analysis where she clarifies the role of policy in rural contexts. Brenner calls for a critique of policies to examine how rurality is being defined in policy, if the policy has any assumptions around all places being the same, and how rurality is being addressed within the policy. The influx of anti-Queer policies across the nation fail to consider how these harmful policies might continue to further erase Queerness from rural contexts, which signals a need for a critical distributive analysis of those policies (Brenner, 2021).

Lastly, as I was researching for this literature review, I presented at the National Rural Education Association conference (October 2022) on contemporary issues of Queerness in rural schools to a packed conference room. School leaders/administration, stakeholders, researchers, graduate students, school board members, and teachers filled the room to discuss Queer issues in a rural context. That moment happened while I was rereading Mary Gray's foundational study that explored rural Queer youth experiences and is now more than a decade old. As far as I know, no other study has been produced to that scale that explores rural Queer youth experiences in schools. As anti-Queer policies are passed from the state and local levels into schools, Queer youth and educators will continue to be at risk because of a system that does not support and accept them.

The contemporary harmful educational policies around Queerness, coupled with Gray's study and the histories of Matthew Shepard and Brandon Teena (among countless others not mentioned here or undocumented), generate a need to further examine topics that address rurality

and Queerness in K-12 educational spaces. A systematic literature review can identify the themes around rurality and Queerness so that researchers, policymakers, educators, caregivers, and community stakeholders can better understand the challenges, experiences, and opportunities related to how place influences gender and sexuality. Therefore, in this literature review, I seek to examine the ways in which empirical studies have described Queerness and rurality in K-12 education spaces.

- How have research studies described the intersections of Queerness and rurality in K-12 education spaces?

Conceptual Framework

Queer Studies

I use Queer studies to broadly explore what gets ‘queered’ in colonized (Western, White, able-bodied, cis-heteronormative) spaces. Within this literature review, Queer studies operates to disrupt heteronormativity and what society may consider “norms” for gender and sexual identity (Hennessy; 1993; Watson, 2005). By using Queer studies, I explore the ways in which schools, as a site of gender and sexual identity development (Pascoe, 2012; Thorne, 1993), may reproduce cis-heterosexual values in rural schools which directly influence all students’ gender identities and sexual orientations. Therefore, readings in Queer studies lean into feminism, Black Queer feminism, disability studies, and Indigenous scholarship. Part of the Queer studies foundation that centers white feminists Eve Sedgwick (1994), Teresa de Lauretis (1991), and Judith Butler (1990) is used in this work to ground the flux state of Queer identity development in relation to societal norms. Furthermore, Queer studies center Queer Black feminism (e.g., Combahee River Collective), disability studies (e.g., *Care work* by Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha), and Indigenous scholarship (e.g., Arvin, et al., 2013), which generates a more

holistic understanding of the function of Queer and intersecting identities within a societal structure. Part of Queer Black feminism, the Combahee River Collective (1981) writes, "we were told in the same breath to be quiet both for the sake of being 'ladylike' and to make us less objectionable in the eyes of white people," (p. 211) which situates labels through an intersectional lens (Crenshaw, 1989). Piepzna-Samarasinha (2018) presents disability studies as a way to queer our understanding of an able-bodied society while also emphasizing the temporal nature of identity work. Arvin et al. (2013) challenges the role of heteropatriarchy and settler colonialism that center Indigenous knowledge. These Queer studies pieces provide a foundation that seeks to explore the role of labels that intersect in a society that recycles dominant oppressive discourses that influence identity constructions. Through a literacy lens, dominant discourses of white, cis-heterosexual, able-bodiedness, historically influences the ways in which minority groups see themselves which has the potential to shift the ways in which we construct our identities through literacy (Bishop, 1990). Therefore, Queer existence is constructed in power dynamics, oppressive histories, and societal values systems.

Berlant and Warner (1995) describes how Queer studies create conversations on how much the "general culture is riddled with heteronormativity" (p. 349). In spaces that may value community norms over individualized opinions, the reproduction of heteronormativity gets recycled in an effort to not disrupt community values. Through the works in Queer studies, it becomes clear the value of disrupting White, able-bodied, cis-heterosexual, male, western-centric norms that impact identity throughout these studies. Joy (2015) states, "This is to ultimately affirm a pluralism of being and worlds — a move both queer and political, human and beyond the human at once" (p. 224). Queerness exists both as an identity and as a factor in politics, whereas the Queer body exists at the same time as the Queer invisible existence of that body. In

other words, a person's Queer identity is still a part of them regardless of their own visibility or society's Queer visibilities. Within this framework of Queer studies, it also offers up a chance of "incessant unsettling" because Queer "generates other possibilities—multiple, cyborgian, spectral, transcorporeal, transmaterial—for living" (Luciano & Chen, 2015, p. 192, 187). This framework operates to create a critical sense of Queerness in rural contexts.

When analyzing the articles, Queer studies served as a critical foundation to explore how schools in rural areas influence Queer identities and, in what ways, how cis-heterosexual norms get recycled under variables such as: access to resources, educator practices, curriculum, and community, parental, and educator perspectives. This literature review operates within Queer studies to critique how research studies have explored Queerness and rurality in K-12 schools; those rural schools are not only a space of identity development, but also a place that reproduces gender and sexual norms (Pascoe, 2012; Thorne, 1993).

Methodology

This literature review sought out to solely explore peer-reviewed journal articles from 2012 to 2022; however, I did include reports from Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) because, not only where they consistently cited in other selected journal articles, they also provide longitudinal data. I chose this 10-year time span because the combination of rural and queerness research in K-12 schools is considered to be a more contemporary discourse based on the lack of research prior to 2012. I also selected the ten-year timeline based on Mary Gray's (2009) book release being the first ethnographic research centered on rural Queer youth and recent, aforementioned policies. Given the nature of Gray's work, I also anticipated a small lapse between publication of the book and research that may have been influenced by it which is what led to the decision to start at 2012. I am specifically

interested in research conducted in the United States because Queer politics and schooling in general is vastly different internationally. While there may be commonalities of rural Queer identities internationally, the United States political climate, neglectful health care system for Queer people (Abelson, 2021; Movement Advancement Project), and long history of Queer trauma (e.g., Matthew Shepard, the HIV/AIDs epidemic, and mass shootings in Queer spaces) provided a narrower viewpoint into rural Queer youth in educational spaces (Casey et al., 2019; Stanley, 2021). My inclusion criteria focused on empirical literature and three invited reports that examined how schools are a place where gender and sexuality identities are topics of part of the lived experience of existing in rural American schools (which could include lived-experiences, policies, school climate, etc.). The research studies selected may have interrogated (example articles included): Teacher/Administrators' attitudes (Hall & Rodgers, 2019), students' sense of belonging and existence (Bailey et al., 2022; Kosciw et al., 2014, 2016), curriculum choices (Page, 2017), developments of "safe spaces" (Whidden et al., 2020), mental/physical health (Ramos et al., 2014), community norms (Bishop & McClellan, 2016), allyship (Whidden et al., 2022), and victimization (De Pedro et al., 2018; Kosciw et al., 2015). In keeping with guidance on rural salience (Biddle et al., 2019; Coladarci, 2007), the articles were reviewed to make sure they discussed rurality and Queerness as two intersecting identities that are shaped in schools. For example, one article (Leonardi & Staley, 2021) focused on a Queering mindset from an educator perspective; however, rurality was never a variable in the discussion. Another article that was eliminated was Evans and Chapman (2014); while their study did take place in a rural district and addressed connections to bullying in the for of LGB victimization, the participants' sexual orientation was not collected. Therefore, they could not make assertions as to a rural

Queer salience and getting bullied. This process involved reading through the abstracts or searching the study for a rural or Queer component.

Subjectivity

My earliest memories of dealing with my own Queer rural identity were linked to shame. My Southern Baptist preacher announced to the church that if you were a homosexual, then you have sinned and will go to hell. Most days in middle school I heard, "That's so gay," or "You're so gay." My uncles would ask at every birthday luncheon which new girl I was dating. For 23 years, I was more comfortable with the idea of not being alive than I was admitting who I was. Despite this early "rural" education that taught me homosexuality was a problem/sin, my soul was still rural through and through. I wanted to learn from my grandma how to bake pies, garden for fresh radishes, and sew plastic Christianity cross bookmarks. Whenever I would hop on my four-wheeler, I felt my body breathe with mother nature. Friends and I laughed until curfew in the Walmart parking lot with our Sonic slushes. These moments were the juxtaposition of love and acceptance. I did not understand how a place I loved so much refused to let me love.

In addition to growing up gay in the country, another important subjectivity of mine in this work is my experience as a middle school teacher. As of 2019, I was still in the closet as a second-year teacher. But, after a class discussion where a 7th grader exclaimed: "I just don't understand why people can't love who they want to love," I finally knew it was time to come out. While coming out was very much a personal journey, my students' voices acted as a catalyst to my soul finally living its truth. From that moment, I gradually became a more confident, openly gay educator in a rural-serving middle school. During my tenure after coming out, I had many of the experiences Gray (2009) describes in her study. I had a colleague say, "I love working with you; I just don't support your lifestyle." A student walked out of my classroom

because she found out I was gay. At the same time, I had students write their coming out letters in my classroom and tell me they appreciated my shirts that say, “love wins.”

As a *public* school teacher, I taught students from all genders and sexualities, which meant, as an employee of the public, I needed to make *all* my students feel acknowledged. I taught Queer students, which meant Queerness needed to be evident in my classroom climate. I did not provide “opt out” forms for a documentary called, *A Place at the Table,* that featured the narrative of a gay Jewish second-generation immigrant because people working with public education cannot opt out of Queer youth and educators. Therefore, I come to this literature review through lived experiences as a rural farm kid walking barefoot on the rocky river bottom and then as an openly gay educator. My personal subjectivity allows me to see the fears from the stories of Matthew Shepard and Brandon Teena, while nodding in agreement to Mary Gray’s Walmart stories and the role of small-town politics. While it took me time, I finally chose love.

Search Procedure

I performed a systematic search that used EBSCOhost in November 2022. I used the Education and Health and Medicine (psychology/behavior) databases. My Boolean phrase was (LGBT+ OR lesbian OR gay OR homosexual OR bisexual OR transgender OR queer*) AND (Rural*) AND (K-12 OR elementary schools OR secondary schools OR k-5 OR 6-8 OR 9-12). This search yielded 30 articles; however, only 10 met the search criteria.

Second, I performed a search using the *Journal of LGBT Youth* because it specifically focuses on Queer youth. The search phrase was as follows: (LGBT* OR lesbian OR gay OR homosexual OR bisexual OR transgender OR queer*) AND (rural*) AND (K-12 OR elementary schools OR secondary schools OR K-5 OR 6-8 Or 9-12). This produced only one article; however, it did not have rural as a variable in the study.

Third, I explored two rural-focused journals. The search term I used for both journals was (LGBT) and (Queer). *The Rural Educator* produced four articles and the *Journal of Research in Rural Education* extracted one article. None of the articles met the search criteria of 2012-2020, peer-reviewed research, and Queer and rural focused.

After exploring those journals that center rural and Queer scholarship, I searched the [COLLEGE] Libraries Database. The search phrase was (LGBT* OR lesbian OR gay OR homosexual OR bisexual OR transgender or queer*) AND (rural*) AND (k-12 OR elementary schools OR secondary schools OR k-5, 6-8, 9-12) AND (eu:PeerReviewed) AND (x0:artchap) AND (yr:2012..2022). This search yielded one result, which did meet the search criteria.

In a final attempt to find research, I mined the references found within the literature review to perform a guided ancestral search. By reviewing the literature review sections from research that met the search criteria, I discovered three final reports from the GLSEN that met the search criteria. I included these reports due to the longitudinal data and how rurality and Queerness were co-discussed.

Thirteen articles resulted from the search criteria and procedures. Refer to Appendix A for a detailed list of the articles included in this review which highlights, the type of research (e.g., urban/rural and Queer/cis-hetero comparative; national survey; case study; etc.), connections to both rurality and Queerness, and how their findings present a rural Queer salience.

Guiding Questions for Article Analysis (Analysis Plan)

After completing the search, I used the following questions to analyze the ways in which each article adds to the discourse of Queerness in rural schools. Using my conceptual framework

and guided by Hallinger's (2014) process for review, the articles were evaluated through the following questions:

Guiding Question	Exemplar Text and Sample Connection to Question
How are Queerness and rurality the central topics of interest, guiding questions, and/or the goals of the study?	Bishop, H. N., & McClellan, R. L. (2016). Resisting social justice: Rural school principals' perceptions of LGBTQ students-. *Journal of School Leadership*, 26(1). https://doi.org/10.1177/105268461602600010 ■ "This article explores how principals of rural high schools perceive and support LGBTQ students." (p. 125)
What Queer and/or rural conceptual perspective guides the review's selection, evaluation, and interpretation of the studies?	Bailey, B. M., Heath, M. A., Jackson, A. P., Ward, C., Black, A., Cooper, E., Griner, D., & Shafer, K. (2022). An ethnographic exploration of adolescent homophobic language in a rural religiously-conservative high school. *Journal of LGBT Youth*, 19(2), 217–245. https://doi.org/10.1080/19361653.2020.1788479 ■ Rural Conceptual Perspective: Analyzing the role of "religious" and "conservative" while defining rural in this study in order to evaluate the studies' rural salience.
How do the sources and types of data employed in the study signal Queer or place-based education methodologies?	McQuillan, M. T. (2021). Scaling gender and sexual diversity policies in K-12 schools. *Educational Policy*. https://doi.org/10.1177/0895904821105846 ■ Signaled Queer Methods by focusing on centering gender and sexuality diversity and attempting to disrupt top-down policy implementation
What is the nature of the data evaluation and analysis employed in the review and how does it signal to a rural Queer salience?	Palmer, N., Kosciw, J. G., & Bartkiewicz, M. (2012). Strengths and silences: LGBTQ Students in Rural and Small Towns. Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN). https://www.glsen.org/research/strengths-and-silences-lgbtq-students-rural-and-small-towns ■ By using nation data and focusing on rural students, a rural Queer salience presented numerous challenges for Queer students in rural schools.
What are the major results of the review saying about the intersection of Queer and rural identity?	Page, M. L. (2017). From awareness to action: Teacher attitude and implementation of LGBT-inclusive curriculum in the english language arts classroom. SAGE Open, 7(4). ERIC. https://doi-org.ezproxy.lib.vt.edu/10.1177/2158244017739949

	■ Rural ELA teachers felt less comfortable with Queer topics in classrooms, had fewer resources, felt afraid of community/parent backlash, and were less likely to have GSAs as compared to urban counterparts.

Using these five questions, alongside my conceptual framework, I analyzed and coded each of the thirteen articles that were selected based on the search criteria. Example Codes: *safe space helps with feelings of enjoying school* (Whidden et al., 2020), *[comparative] rural school nurses were not as likely to have access to continuing education for LGBT health issues* (Ramos et al., 2014), and *rural school principals "encouraged students not to stand out"* (Bishop and McClellan, (2016). From those codes, I developed three thematic themes discussed in the following section.

Findings from the Systematic Review

From this yield, I revisited my research question: How have research studies described the intersections of Queerness and rurality in K-12 education spaces?

I identified the following themes surrounding Queerness in rural contexts: victimization and safety (including safe spaces), attitudes towards Queer topics in rural contexts and issues around school-provided Queer resources. These themes from the articles that met the search criteria above provide insight into Queer topics in rural public-school settings.

In this section, I describe three themes and how those findings fit into the questions that guided my analysis. Those themes connect to my conceptual framework as they present the challenges of the intersecting labels (rural and Queer) in conversation with school as an institution and site of identity development (Pascoe, 2012; Thorne, 1993).

Evidence of Victimization and Safety Challenges for Queer Rural Youth

The first thematic category centers around higher levels of victimization and lower levels of feelings of safety for rural Queer youth. Rural Queer students often faced higher levels of

physical and verbal abuse as compared to urban counterparts (*Kosciw et al., 2016; Kosciw et al., 2015; *Kosciw et al., 2014; *Palmer et al., 2012). The Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) National School Climate report (*Kosciw et al., 2016; 2014), a national survey that analyzed the experiences of more than 10,000 (2016) and 7,000 (2014) LBTQ participants from ages 13-21, found that rural students were more likely to experience the "highest levels of victimization" (*Kosciw, 2016, p. xxiv) and reported that rural students also heard more anti-LGBT dialogue as opposed to other school locales. Similarly, in Palmer et al.'s (2012) analysis of the [2010-2011] GLSEN National Climate Survey, 87% of rural LGBT students reported being verbally harassed and 47% had been physically harassed.

Themes of victimization were also highlighted in Bailey and colleague's (2022) ethnographic case study in a rural high school exploring the use of homophobic language in schools. While analyzing the purpose of homophobic language, students related their usage to a sense of social hierarchy, mimicking adults' language, an act of rebellion, and generating toxic masculinity (Bailey et al., 2022). For example, under the category "the language of marginalization," students reported that they felt that homophobic language was used to make another peer feel "less than" (p. 225).

These examples provide context into how language is being used to recreate social hierarchies and harm Queer students in specific contexts, such as how a rural school with conservative values may use homophobic language to maintain a cis-hetero dominant narrative. Up until this point, at the intersection of Queerness and rurality in K-12 educational spaces is victimization. With higher levels of hearing verbal abuse, such as homophobic remarks (regardless of sexual orientation) and bullying, students potentially associated those variables in connection to a feeling of safety.

When schools include inclusive spaces (Gay-Straight Alliances) and teachers are trained on creating safe zones, students have the possibility to felt more connected to their school which is highlighted in Whidden and colleague's (2020). In a rural Texas high school, researchers (Whidden et al., 2020) found that students enjoyed school when they perceived an inclusive learning environment, when social stressors while forming relationships with teachers and peers were lower, and family support allowed them to feel more connected in the school climate. When given the opportunity to experience inclusive spaces, Whidden et al. (2020) argued that rural students felt less social stress and more classroom confidence and simply enjoyed being at school after the development of a Gay-Straight Alliance, resiliency trainings, and creation of safe zones. De Pedro et al. used a rural subsample of the 2013-2015 California Healthy Kids Survey to explore the relationship between school climate, safety and victimization and Queer identities. De Pedro et al.'s study highlighted the importance of having "LGBTQ support, peer intervention, and teacher intervention" in order for LGBTQ[4] youth to feel a sense of safety (p. 275). Therefore, Queer-affirming educators also had a correlation to students having a sense of safety in schools (De Pedro et al., 2018).

With higher levels of victimization/verbal abuse, and a lower sense of safety in rural schools that lack inclusive and safe spaces, rural Queer students also face more issues around substance abuse (Fallin-Bennett & Goodin, 2019) and school attendance (Palmer et al., 2012) compared to urban/suburban areas. Fallin-Bennett and Goodin (2019) described, in their quantitative data set from the 2015 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) Youth Behavior Risk Survey within Kentucky, "It is important to identify potentially modifiable

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[4] I use LGBTQ here to mirror the language of De Pedro (2018).

interventions to reduce substance use among LGB[5] teens in a largely rural state like Kentucky" (p. 221). Kosciw et al., (2015), used a data set collected from Kosciw et al., (2012), which surveyed over 8,000 students' relationship between being *out* and their well-being. Kosciw et al., (2015) found, "the path between depression and missed days of schools was larger for rural than urban students, and the path between depression and GPA revealed a similar, albeit only marginally significant, relationship" (p. 174).

Apart from rural locales, LGB students across Kentucky reported higher rates of substance abuse (tobacco, alcohol, heroin, and cocaine) as compared to their heterosexual peers (Fall-Bennett & Goodin, 2019). Fallin-Bennett and Goodin (2019) also described, in conversation with Palmer et al. (2012), that Queer rural students did not feel like they had an adult to talk to. Palmer and colleagues argued, using the GLSEN National School Climate survey data set,

> "Only 13% of rural LGBT students said staff members intervened most or all of the time when homophobic comments were made, and only 11% said that staff members intervened most or all of the time when negative comments were made about gender expressions" (p. x).

When Queer rural students are placed in an environment that produces physical and verbal abuse (De Pedro, 2018; Kosciw, 2016; Kosciw, 2014) coupled with spaces that lack supportive adults (Palmer et al., 2012) and less inclusive educational policies (McQuillian, 2021) schools fail rural Queer youth. These compounding factors may contribute led to a school-to-prison pipeline for Queer youth (Snapp et al., 2015). These studies show a theme of victimization and safety when exploring rurality and Queerness in K-12 schools. Meanwhile, they also present

[5] While it is not clear in the study, LGB may be stated to place emphasis on sexuality since the "survey did not capture gender identity beyond male and female" (Fallin-Bennett and Goodin, 2019, p. 224).

deficit narratives and social constructions of rural as homophobic and unaccepting spaces for Queer rural youth. Moreover, these research studies and reports describe the intersection of rurality and Queerness for youth to be a space of challenges and risks. Given the Queer studies framework, these spaces of victimization and lacking safety are potentially results of schools de-valuing Queer existence. In other words, if Queerness is socially constructed in schools as an "othered" identity, all students, especially Queer identifying students, may face victimization.

Attitudes of Educators Prevalent in the Research about Queerness in Rural Schools

The literature also illuminated educators' attitudes being centered in Queerness in rural school spaces. While the first theme relied mostly on quantitative data, this theme was developed across studies using a variety of methodologies. Bishop and McClellan (2016) used qualitative semi-structured interviews. Page (2017) implemented mixed methods (QUANT-qual). Hall and Grayson (2019) relied on quantitative data accessed from the 2006-2014 General Social Survey. These methodologies are important to note because the qualitative sections offer the *why* and not just the *what* is happening with Queerness in rural schools.

In a study that examined teachers' comfort levels with including Queer themes in their classroom, Page (2017) found that most rural teachers simply never addressed Queer issues and described feeling uncomfortable talking about Queerness in the classroom. In terms of rural Queer salience, Page's study used a statewide online survey, followed by optional interviews, to compare rural to urban-centric spaces. For example, Page reported, "Teachers in rural schools, proportionally, felt less comfortable using LGBT literature in their curricula than did their suburban and urban counterparts" (p. 7). Comfort level could also be a result of not having access to educational resources or support from administrators and/or local stakeholders.

This theme also addressed fears from teachers such as losing one's job, community and parental backlash, and pressure from administrators (Page, 2017). Page (2017) described, "...teachers in smaller schools and in smaller communities showing higher levels of agreement with the statement that they would be 'in trouble' with their communities if they utilized LGBT literature in the classroom" (p. 9). "Tolerating' study diversity" (p.114) from a community perspective was also a factor in a study exploring principals' perceptions of LGBTQ students (Bishop & McClellan, 2016). Bishop and McClellan (2016) described their setting and participants as "...[principals] serving in areas where community may be resistant to supporting LGBTQ students, we looked for schools in rural areas with high poverty, high numbers of people with evangelistic conservative religious ideologies, and few college-education residents" (p. 130). In this explanation, the term rural is connected to monolithic ideologies of rurality such conservative, high poverty, not college educated, and evangelical. While those variables are additional factors to explore in the context of Queer identity development, they may not signal rurality for everyone. Opposed to Page and through the perspective of the principals, Bishop and McClellan (2016) found, "none of the principals could recall instances of community resistance to their leadership in support of LGBTQ students, and all were in agreement that the community expected them to support all students" (p. 140). Page and Bishop and McClellan's studies begin to emphasize a power dynamic around educators within rural contexts.

Similar to how Bishop and McClellan (2016) described their setting, "rural" was not always the central variable when describing why educators may have negative attitudes towards Queerness in rural schools. Studies that focused on educators' attitudes consistently mentioned that religious beliefs, age, and conservative values influenced their attitudes towards Queer issues (Bishop & McClellan, 2016; Hall & Rodgers, 2019; Page, 2017). For example, Hall and

Rodgers's (2019) study analyzed data from the General Social Survey, "...a repeated cross-sectional survey with nationally representative sample of adults in the United States," (p.28) to explore teachers' attitudes around Queerness which found factors such as "age, race/ethnicity, geographic region, political orientation, and religiosity" (p. 32) were associated with teacher attitudes. Page's (2017) study which surveyed teachers attitudes and comfort levels to LGBTQ+ topics in their classroom found, "the older the teacher, the lesser the comfort level," and those who identified with strong "...religious beliefs were more likely to disagree or strongly disagree [to include LGBT literature within their curricula]" (p. 4-5). While the description of comfort level around Queer topics may not be explicitly harmful, avoided curriculum generates harmful microaggressions based on deficit ideals and oppressive biases which could lead to rural identity erasure (Eppley, 2011). Rural in this context is being used with other social identifiers such as older, strong religious values (evangelical), conservative politics, and high poverty rates in order to describe attitudes towards Queerness in schools.

When educators, indirectly or directly, display levels of discomfort towards a particular social group, their biases have the potential to influence a student's opportunity to thrive in certain school climates. This is echoed in Palmer et al.'s (2012) findings, which suggest that staff also rarely intervened in situations where harmful language was used. Moreover, these biases were also a factor in Bishop and McClellan's (2016) study of rural principals. Bishop and McClellan argued,

> We heard from participants that they advocated through (a) love and professional support. They set out to "love each student as their own," even though they clearly conveyed to students that they themselves did not believe in "the student's lifestyle" or "choice." Further troubling, participants enforced acceptance and inclusivity through (b)

policy and procedures, changing dress codes, and "encouraging" students not to "stand out," what sounded a lot like "don't come out" to us. (p. 144)

Queer rural students experience higher rates of victimization while also existing in a space where adults may be uncomfortable or lack resources to fully embrace Queer students and educators. While this may reflect a general unwillingness to accept and discuss any type of sexuality amongst educators, heteronormative culture has rooted itself into curriculum even when it is not explicitly discussed. For example, an English teacher may teach Romeo and Juliet in 9th grade and, while the teacher may not discuss the heterosexuality within the text, students still see and read about a heterosexual relationship. Darder (2017) writes, "In many ways, teachers replicate the same fears, frustrations and insecurities as their students when they hit unfamiliar territory and receive no substantive support in developing their teaching abilities within the context of their everyday practice" (p. 57). When educators present fearful attitudes due to concerns of community backlash, it may be a result of a hegemonic society not providing opportunities, resources, and security for educators to feel substantive support. Moreover, if Queer identities are constantly placed in unfamiliar territory in a cis-heteronormative landscape, educators and youth may continue to reproduce those fears and frustrations.

Rural School Resources and Queer Identity

A final theme explained in this literature review is about issues around Queer resources, including curricula, Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs), health care, and policies, which all influence available access to resources. Rural teachers' discomfort around Queer topics may be correlated not only to personal belief biases and community backlash but also perhaps a lack of Queer educational resources. Echoed from the previous theme, Page (2017), for example, found during their voluntary qualitative interviewing that most rural teachers felt they would get "in trouble"

when including Queer topics in an English Language Arts classroom (p. 9); whereas, the quantitative data showed “rural teachers’ lower comfort levels and lower awareness of resources coincide with a lower rate of curricular diversification (p. 7). This could be due to rural schools lacking funding in parts of the country or having to share resources across the county amongst multiple schools within a district.

Students also described less access to LGBT-related[6] support resources (*Kosciw et al., 2016; *Kosciw et al., 2014; *Palmer et al., 2012). Kosciw et al. (2016) used the National School Climate Survey data to report that “students from schools in the South, the Midwest, and small towns or rural areas were least likely to have access to LGBT-related resources and supports” (p. 95). The importance of those resources was found in Palmer et al.’s (2012) earlier study which also used National School Climate data; however, rural and small town was a central variable. They argued that when schools did have more LGBT-related supports and resources, such as “GSAs, many supportive school personnel, inclusive curricula, and comprehensive anti-bullying policies” (p. xii), rural students had higher feelings of belonging and self-esteem with lower levels of victimization and depression. Ramos et al. (2013) examined data gathered from the 2009 New Mexico Department of Health, which surveyed school nurses, to explore the disparities between urban and rural school nurses. Ramos et al. (2013) found that rural school nurses “were less likely to have had CE [continuing education] within the previous 5 years on 2 behavioral health topics: suicide risk identification and prevention, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) health” (p. 267). Lack of school provided resources may not be teachers, caregivers, administrators, or nurses choice because of how people and institutions in power have used educational sites to reproduce a dominant (cis-hetero) narrative.

[6] LGBT is used here because it was used in cited studies.

Page (2017), Kosciw et al. (*2016), and Kosciw et al. (*2014) mentioned the lack of GSAs in rural communities, which have been vital for some schools in having a place to collect and disseminate Queer resources. Meanwhile, De Pedro et al. (2018) found that "GSAs were associated with lower levels of safety" (p. 275). De Pedro et al. further explored this finding by examining the barriers of establishing a GSA and who gets to find safety in a GSA. In other words, some students may protect their own personal safety by not joining a GSA because of a larger climate of homophobic attitudes and policies.

Lack of resources, higher levels of victimization, and conflicting attitudes from school personnel can be tied back to policy. Bishop and McClellan (2016) found through interviewing rural school principals that they often deferred to their county's policy when addressing issues around gender and sexuality. Educators constantly used "policy" (state and local,) to navigate out of Queer topics in education. They stated, "To keep behaviors and identities under control, participants indicated that they would use school policy to maintain order" (p. 145). McQuillian (2021) conducted a policy document analysis in Illinois to examine how local districts adopt state legislation in relation to gender and sexual diversity (GSD) reforms. McQuillian stated, "The regression analysis revealed rural and less financially-resourced districts might need additional supports to implement inclusive policies through administrative guidance…" (p.31-32). Lack of Queer and rural supportive policy highlights the importance of addressing how institutions utilized power through policy to oppress and assimilate youth in the educational system.

Therefore, without policies that support Queerness, rural schools become spaces that lack access to Queer resources which may reflect a community that lacks Queer resources as well. When educators and youth lack Queer-affirming resources, it has the potential to erasure Queer

livelihood which recycles a dominate cis-heterosexual society. Rural schools often act as the heartbeat to rural communities because of the economic opportunities that rural schools provide. School personnel are constantly bound to county, state, federal, and/or tribal policies, which historically have not functioned for marginalized populations. Lacking Queer educational resources is an entire school personnel issue, which directly influences the larger attempt to generate a Queer-affirming space to learn as a community.

Discussion

This literature review examines how research studies (including three national survey reports) have explored the intersections of rurality and Queerness in K-12 schools. Rural Queer students are at risk of higher rates of both physical and verbal abuse, are more likely to feel unsafe in schools, experience substance abuse, and have more school absences as compared to their urban peers. These factors generate a negative school climate, influencing Queer rural students' overall potential to thrive in schools that do not have policies (McQuillan, 2021), practices (Page, 2017), and people that support Queer identity (Whidden et al., 2020) in school contexts. Rural schools also were more likely to lack Queer resources or Queer-affirming education which influenced teachers (Page, 2017), nurses (Ramos et al., 2014), and administrators' (Bishop and McClellan, 2016). Many teachers did not engage in Queer topics due to personal beliefs or fear of the community and/or district backlash (Page, 2017). Principals in Bishop and McClellan's (2016) study relied on policy to address Queer issues and explained how they treat all their kids with love and respect while also enforcing a "don't come out" environment. This type of communication echoes histories of "Don't ask, don't tell" mentalities that force Queer people to hide. If students are encouraged be fully themselves, gain confidence,

and be in inclusive environments, those students are more likely to not feel connected in those schools (Whidden et al., 2020).

The themes I developed highlight the ways in which Queerness intersects in rural contexts to possibly disrupt place norms or monolithic narratives of place. Rural and Queer identities may often be constructed over time with pressures of the individual *self* having friction with the community. For example, growing up in a rural community the only Queer representation I had was from TV shows; each Queer character (Kurt from *Glee,* Tim Gunn on *Project Runway)* lived in an urban space. I did not feel Queer enough to fit in with the urban-Queer representation and I did not know if my rural self was valued in Queer communities since I never saw rural Queer people growing up. Therefore, based on the findings section, I ask: how can both Queer and rural communities come together to cultivate a sense of safety? Whidden et al. (2020)'s support strategies can be a starting point to create spaces for rural Queer youth to (re)gain confidence in themselves. What conversations must take place for both Queerness and rurality to co-generate love and acceptance? Page (2017)'s study calls for literature and narratives to (re)center love and acceptance in classrooms while also addressing fears of community backlash. How can schools be a place that provides resources, health care, and legal protections that celebrate rural Queer students and educators? McQuillian (2021) policy analyze addresses how funding and policies working from a top-down perspective create inequities across locales.

If schools lack resources and policies to affirm student identities, then it could lead to higher rates of victimization and feeling unsafe (Kosciw et al., 2015; *Palmer et al., 2012). Educators should [be paid to] learn how to cultivate Queer-affirming spaces (Page, 2017; Whidden et al., 2020) in order for those students to exist fully in schools. Issues on Queerness in

schools is a product of society's cis-heteropatriarchy that normalizes and values social hierarchies (e.g., cis-heterosexuality) (Bailey et al., 2022). More research focused on Queerness in rural schools is needed to create spaces that truly love and support all students and educators. However, further research must also hold space for the ways in which rural schools have celebrated Queerness in their communities. Within these further research endeavors, researchers and policymakers also must be clear on their definition of rurality because of how strong religious beliefs (evangelical), age (older teachers), conservative political values, not college educated, and high rates of poverty were attached to a rural identity. Moreover, the intersectional spectrum of possibilities is vast with rural Queerness; future research should consider rural Queer students[7] of Color, variously-abled rural Queer youth, indigenous Queer youth (two-spirited), and low-income rural Queer youth. There is also a need to specifically focus on trans and non-binary youth in rural spaces; trans and non-binary youth may not feel comfortable in their own skin and require health services (e.g., hormone treatments).

These conversations are consistent with Mary Gray's (2009) *Out in the Country* findings which highlight the struggles and existence of Queerness in rural youth. Similar to the selected articles, a participant in Gray's study also experienced high levels of verbal abuse both online and in person after posting photos of them in drag at a local Walmart. Miriam Abelson's (2019) *Men in place: Trans masculinity, race, and sexuality in America,* attempted to explore the rural variable and found that many of her rural identifying participants also described fears of homophobia, transphobia, and violence within rural spaces. Apart from the rural context, this theme of victimization and levels of safety are also connected in broader Queer studies discourse around Eric Stanley's (2021) *Atmospheres of violence* and Erica Meiners's (2016) For *the*

[7] I use "students/youth"; however, it can be interchanged for: "educators," "community members," "school personnel," "parents" and should welcome allies.

children? Protecting innocence in a carceral state. Stanley contributes to a discourse of Queer people being overkilled and facing public violence; whereas, Meiners' attempts to decode how institutions (prison and schools) parallel one another to police a feeling of safety. In this case, schools and prisons work similarly to generate a sense of security while also oppressing and policing Queer bodies. For example, schools may have an equity district goal while also implementing policies that force transgender students to go to the incorrect bathrooms. Therefore, the theme of higher rates of victimization and a low sense of safety provided by the articles, work in conversation with other Queer studies.

Twelve out of thirteen articles/reports in this literature review had an element of quantitative research data coming from surveys. As researchers navigate this space, ethical considerations must be examined when attempting to reach Queer rural youth. A majority of studies and reports used quantitative survey data; surveys may feel less personal and easier to "remain hidden" for rural Queer youth to participate in. Moreover, a majority of the qualitative studies relied on participants who were adults; In many cases, youth under eighteen are required to produce a parent or guardians' approval to participate in a study. Furthermore, qualitative research could provide a more complex narrative into issues Queer rural youth face in public schools' systems. Creative narratives, such as *Country Queers* and non-fiction auto/biographic, and contemporary methodologies (e.g., photovoice, autoethnography, queer scavenging) could be spaces that complicate rural Queer discourse by not only presenting valid issues but also by sharing celebrations, histories, and stories that provide rich descriptions of the spectrums of rural Queer livelihood.

Perhaps another implication through discussion could be resisting "awayness" in the context of space (Biddle et al., 2019). "Awayness" generates a complex idea of how people

ground themselves in place identities. This concept explores the nature of the "ingroup" and "outgroup" based on where they live and how long they have lived there (Biddle et al., 2019). Biddle et al. (2019) asserts,

> This framing allows us to ask questions that explore how the lessons from rural communities can support the work of non-rural sites and vice versa, eliminating the need to see attention to rural, suburban, or urban education as a zero-sum endeavor (in which, until recently, rural areas almost always lost) (p. 12).

In other words, Queer rural research should work in conversation with urban, suburban, and/or tribal Queer research in the field of education. By resisting "awayness" in the context of Queerness in educational spaces, research and praxis can generate a mutual conversation of these salient rural issues.

Call to Action

Based on the discussion, there are several implications for future research and practice in supporting Queerness in rural schools.

- Accessing Queer-affirming resources: If rural schools and communities, have fewer visible affirming spaces and resources, online resources may be the space to begin (i.e., *The Trevor Project*, *Learning for Justice, Movement Advancement Project, GLSEN, PLGAG).* As far as affirming literature, The Whippoorwill book awards focus, not only on rural young adult literature, but also, on highlighting marginalized identities in rural spaces. Researchers also need to explore more ways to spread Queer-affirming resources from urban-centric spots to rural, isolated locations, while also developing new locale-based resources.

- Community, families', and educators' attitudes: Anti-Queer policies that are undefined and implemented in rural spaces, influence community, families', and educators' attitudes. Queer youth and educators want to be accepted, loved, and respected in their rural communities. Queerness is not attached to a political agenda, age, religion, or race. In other words, policies that directly target Queerness in schools, specifically trans and non-binary, get politicized. Policymakers and stakeholders with agency need to explicitly write-in protections to allow educators and youth to celebrate Queerness because public schools are supposed to celebrate all humans.
- Victimization and safety: Unfortunately, while the nation may feel more progressive and inclusive, Queer violence still exists; however, bright spots can (re)define Queer joy in rural spaces. Locally, we have a camp for Queer youth; throughout the week, students engage in teambuilding activities, learn about Queer histories, and talk about their own lived experiences. While these campers may face victimization and feel unsafe at schools, these campers find comfort and peace during this weeklong camp. If policies and adults fail to support rural Queer youth and educators, then alternative educational spaces may be needed to challenge these spaces of discomfort (e.g., a camp for Queer youth, a club, a caring group of adults). Moreover, place-based tolerance and anti-bullying workshops, specifically with the topic of Queerness, must also be considered to make sure all students, community members, educators, and parents (re)center their love for community. Hatred is produced from the fear of the unknown; if Queer joy is not visible and celebrated in rural communities, then Queer people risk continuing being victimized in their communities.

Conclusion

A rural Queer salience exists at the center of two communities coming together. Queer youth and educators may seek out rural spaces because being more isolated may provide an opportunity for more private gender and sexual identity exploration or simply an escape from broader societal pressures. Queer identity work is co-constructed with cultivating a sense of security in place. Place and Queer personhood are (un)rooted in both students and educators' own subjectivities that they bring into the classroom. Resisting regional cis-heteronormativity is vital in acknowledging who will get to and who has already existed fully in a rural space.

By considering Queer studies in conversation with place [rurality], educators, researchers, and policymakers can begin to understand the systems of oppression that push kids out of a place and out of being themselves. If schools implement place-based pedagogies (Gruenewald, 2003), alongside Queer studies, all students could begin to understand power dynamics, develop critical thinking in relation to place and identity, and dismantle violence towards Queer people in all spaces.

This literature review sought to explore the ways in which the intersections of Queer identity and rurality in K-12 spaces are described in current research. Structural supports such as, lack of resources and affirming policies, coupled with discomfort with Queer topics (Page, 2017; Bishop & McClellan, 2016), perhaps more based on age, religion, and conservative ideals (Halls & Rodgers, 2019), leads to Queer rural students experiencing even more challenges and difficulty finding support in rural spaces. As communities and schools navigate anti-Queer legislation, it becomes vital to advocate for, listen to, and celebrate Queer rural students and educators. When addressing Queer policy, stakeholders and policymakers must seek to define and address how that policy functions in a rural context (Brenner, 2022).

Rural Queer educators and students exist together and should be celebrated in all schools. Students must have access to books that allow themselves to be seen and have access to Queer-affirming healthcare. Moving forward, communities, schools, and caregivers in rural contexts need to be intentional about methods and strategies to support and celebrate Queer youth and educators. As rural schools seek to love all their students, rural Queer narratives provide insight into the importance of love and care coming from a community that cares for one another.

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Appendix A

Article Citation	Database	Methodology	Relation to Rurality	Relation to Queerness	Queer & Rural Intersections
Bailey, B. M., Heath, M. A., Jackson, A. P., Ward, C., Black, A., Cooper, E., Griner, D., & Shafer, K. (2022). An ethnographic exploration of adolescent homophobic language in a rural religiously-conservative high school. *Journal of LGBT Youth,* 19(2), 217–245. https://doi.org/10.1080/19361653.2020.1788479	EBSCOhost *Journal of LGBT Youth*	**Qualitative**: Observations & Interviews -Non-urban/rural comparative -Random sample *N= 20* male high school students	• Site: rural Intermountain West • Reason: Context (place) influence of a school space • Terms Associated: religious & conservative rural	• -Exploring Homophobic language • "…more accepting of LGBTQIA individuals than other communities in the surrounding area" (p.224).	• Homophobic Language **used to marginalize others** • Maintain **social hierarchy** • Connected to adult **power and authority** while also mimicking adult's language • As an **act of rebellion** • Exploring **sexual ideals** • Generating more **masculinity** within social groups
Whidden, D., Brown, K., & Nix, J. V. (2020). Implementing strategic support for sexual minority youth and exploring the effects of social connectedness. *School Leadership Review*, 15(1). https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ12	EBSCOhost *School Leadership Review*	**Quantitative** Preexperimental Pre/post test groups -Intervention -Non-urban/rural comparative -Sample size: N=~360 students	• rural Texas public high school	• exploring inclusive environments (GSA/Safe Zones) relation to social connectedness in schools • "The ultimate goal was to create a safe, inclusive, tolerant learning space for all students, emphasizing the SMY population" (p. 13).	• high relationship between **enjoying school** and creation of an **inclusive learning environment:** F (1, 194) = 24.539, p = .000 (p. 8). • **Social stress was reduced** with inclusive learning environments: F (1, 194) = 15.760, p = .000 (p.9) • "**Family support was strongly significant"** F (1,194)=14.419, p=.000 (p.10) • "**Classroom confidence** was a significant F (1, 194) = 7.808, p = .005 factor" (p.11) • In this study, students enjoyed coming to school when a GSA was part of their collective experience. Another contributing factor for students enjoying school was providing teacher training related to safe zones and ways to establish havens on campus. Incorporating diverse clubs and organizations creates an

					environment that fosters student-connections (p.12)
Page, M. L. (2017). From awareness to action: Teacher attitude and implementation of LGBT-inclusive curriculum in the english language arts classroom. *SAGE Open*, 7(4). ERIC. https://doi-org.ezproxy.lib.vt.edu/10.1177/2158244017739949	EBSCOhost *SAGE Open*	**Mixed:** Mostly Quantitative (Likert-Scale Survey) with Volunteered Interviews --Rural vs. Urban Comparative -Sample size *N=577* teachers -*46.7%* rural	• "Rural teachers were more highly represented among the respondents (46.7%), followed by suburban (38.8%), and then urban (14.5%)" (p. 3).	• "The survey inquired about ELA teachers' experiences with their media center, their views on curriculum, their instructional purposes, their comfort levels related to LGBT young adult literature in the classroom, their awareness of LGBT resources, their priorities regarding literature selection, and other topics such as school policies (67 items total)" (p.3).	• "Teachers in rural schools, proportionally, **felt less comfortable using LGBT literature** in their curricula than did their suburban and urban counterparts, $\chi^2(2, N = 508) = 72.41, p < .001$." (p. 7) • "Likewise, rural teachers' **comfort levels with discussion** on LGBT issues were also **lower**, $\chi^2(2, N = 504) = 54.19, p < .001$." (p. 7) • "Rural teachers also believed themselves to be **less aware of LGBT young adult literature**, $\chi^2(2, N = 489) = 39.23, p < .001$."(p. 7) • "Teachers in smaller schools were **less likely** to agree that they were **aware of available resources** and teachers in smaller communities also were less likely to agree that they were aware of resources, $\chi^2(7, N = 493) = 63.30, p = .002$." (p. 7) • "When asked why LGBT literature is not used, the most common response (31%) was that teachers were **afraid of challenges or confrontations with parents or other community members.** Other common reasons included **a lack of awareness or education** about such texts (21%) and **lack of budget** or resources to purchase texts (18%)." (p. 7)

					• "The data show that rural teachers were much more likely to feel that they would be **"in trouble" with their communities** if they used LGBT literature in their classrooms, $\chi^2(2, N = 498) = 101.19, p < .001$ (see Figure 5)." (p. 8) • "Rural schools were **far less likely to have a GSA** or similar club than were urban schools, $\chi^2(2, N = 493) = 112.74, p < .001$." (p. 10) • **GSAs did correlate to more awareness of library holdings**, more comprehensive bullying policies, more comfortable including LGBT literature in their curriculum
Kosciw, J. G., Palmer, N. A., & Kull, R. M. (2015). Reflecting resiliency: Openness about sexual orientation and/or gender identity and its relationship to well-being and educational outcomes for LGBT students. American *Journal of Community Psychology*, 55(1/2), 167–178. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10464-014-9642-6	EBSCOhost *American Journal of Community Psychology*	**Quantitative** (Survey Data) -Used GLSEN to help (survey and distribution) -Rural vs. urban comparative -Only surveyed LGBTQ+ students -Sample size *N=7,816 LGBTQ+* students -*29.5%* rural	• "Respondents were fairly evenly split across urban (28.3 %), suburban (42.1 %), and rural (29.5 %) locales, and were 16.0 years old on average" (p. 171). • "…this paper examines a model of outness as both risk and resilience, accounting for LGBT youth's interpersonal experiences in school and the community context (i.e., locale and geo- graphic settings) in which they occur" (p. 168).	• Level of outness in relation to resilience in psychological and academic outcomes • Queerness in relation to: outness, victimization, well-being, academic outcomes, community context	• "Comparisons of the models across community contexts indicate that **the increases in victimization associated with outness were substantially larger for rural youth** than for urban and suburban youth (.26 vs. .16 and .16, respectively; t using pooled standard errors = 3.358 and 3.383)" (p. 174). • "In addition, the path between **depression and missed days of schools was larger for rural** than urban students (.32 vs. .25, t = 2.121), and the path between depression and GPA revealed a similar, albeit only marginally significant, relationship (-.09 vs. -.01, t = 1.767)" (p. 174)

					• "Although outness was associated with enhanced well-being for rural youth as well as other youth, the **indirect path from outness to GPA via victimization and depression may contribute to more negative outcomes among rural LGBT youth** than for other LGBT youth" (p. 174) • "Thus, **rural students may see more of the negative effects of being out**, and this heightened negative contribution may not necessarily be offset by the positive effects of being out, in that the paths between outness and the two well-being indicators did not vary in strength by community context" (p. 174)
Bishop, H. N., & McClellan, R. L. (2016). Resisting social justice: Rural school principals' perceptions of LGBTQ students-. *Journal of School Leadership*, 26(1). https://doi.org/10.1177/10526846160260010	EBSCOhost *Journal of School Leadership*	**Qualitative:** Semistructured Interviews -Non-urban/rural comparative -Sample *N=5* rural principals	• "… investigate how the context of the schools, specifically rural communities, may affect the principals' perceptions and implementation of a positive climate for all students" (p. 127) • "…we looked for schools in rural areas with high poverty rates, high numbers of people with evangelistic conservative religious ideologies, and few college-educated residents. According to the literature, this setting	• "This article explores how principals of rural high schools perceive and support LGBTQ students." (p. 125)	• Principals **wanted to know each student for rapport** and treat **all students with respect.** • Strong value of stability and longevity—**Value in having staff that remains at the school.** • "We heard from participants that they advocated through (a) love and professional support. They set out to "love each student as their own," even though they clearly conveyed to students that **they themselves did not believe in 'the student's lifestyle' or 'choice.'** They commented that support services for LGBTQ students might come in the form of

			may be less safe for LGBTQ students (Finlay & Walther, 2003; Kosciw et al., 2009)" (p. 130)		identity disorder counseling and special education services. Further troubling, **participants enforced acceptance and inclusivity through (b)policy and procedures, changing dress codes, and 'encouraging' students not to 'stand out,' what sounded a lot like "don't come out" to us.** And finally, although most admitted that their **rural communities were extremely conservative and community members had problems with "tolerating" student diversity** (their language, not ours) and despite our leaders' close affiliations and long associations with them, participants claimed they had the ability to conscientiously resist these ties through (c) a sharpened "reflective consciousness" (Theoharis, 2007, p. 250)" (p. 144).
Ramos, M. M., Fullerton, L., Sapien, R., Greenberg, C., & Bauer-Creegan, J. (2014). Rural-urban disparities in school nursing: Implications for continuing education and rural school health. *The Journal of Rural Health.* 30(3), 265–274. https://doi.org/10.1111/jrh.12058	EBSCOhost *Journal of Rural Health*	**Quantitative** (Survey tested for knowledge) -Rural vs. urban comparative -Sample: *N= 311* school nurses -35% nurses working in rural schools	• rural school nurses • Among respondents, 200 (64.3%) worked in metropolitan counties and 111 (35.7%) worked in rural counties (p. 267).	• School health (including gender and sexuality)	• "Finally, **rural school nurses**, compared with metropolitan school nurses, **were less likely to have had CE within the previous 5 years on 2 behavioral health topics: suicide risk identification and prevention, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender** (LGBT) health (Table 2)" (p. 267). • "Our findings suggest that **education and training on LGBT health disparities may**

					be lacking and needed for school nurses, regardless of rural or metropolitan setting" (p.270).
McQuillan, M. T. (2021). Scaling gender and sexual diversity policies in K-12 schools. *Educational Policy*. https://doi.org/10.1177/0895904821105846	EBSCOhost *Educational Policy*	**Multi-Modal** *Qualitative:* Case Study of Illinois (Samples, Coding/Content Analysis) *Quantitative:* Analysis (Descriptive, Longitudinal, Regression) -Rural vs. urban comparative	• Uses geography as a variable when exploring LGBTQ+ policies	• District policies in connection to sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression	• Contrary to these findings, I did not find an association between greater policy protections and locale, higher per student spending, or lower socioeconomic status in Illinois. **Only higher enrollment predicted greater policy protections in this study,** a relationship driven by Chicago Public Schools (CPS) that did not withstand robustness checks, such as omitting CPS from the analysis (p. 31) • Districts with greater financial resources (proxied by per-pupil-spending) were more likely, and rural districts were less likely to have administrative guidance and have formal guidance when controlling for the other local characteristics in either model (p. 31) • "The regression analysis revealed **rural and less financially-resourced districts might need additional supports to implement inclusive policies through** administrative guidance, a result that aligned with the types of districts that lacked policy protections in previous document analysis concerning LGBTQ+ students (Demissie et

					al., 2018; GLSEN, 2015)" (p. 31-32). • Taking these evaluations into consideration along with the current study, the limited evidence suggests urban districts with more financial resources have the greater capacity to institutionalize gender and sexuality-based reforms through policy documents, while rural districts lack this capacity (p.32)
Fallin-Bennett, A., & Goodin, A. (2019). Substance use and school characteristics in lesbian, gay, bisexual, and heterosexual high school students. *The Journal of School Health,* 89(3), 219–225. https://doi.org/10.1111/josh.12731	EBSCOhost *Journal of School Health*	**Quantitative** (Survey) -Comparative of LGB *(n=202)* participants vs. heterosexual (*n=2244)* participants	• "This study focuses on youth in Kentucky, a rural, tobacco growing state with a historically pro-tobacco policy environment and high smoking rates" (p. 219) • Rural sexual minorities "experience less community connectedness and more minority stress" (p. 219).	• Exploring the relation between substance abuse & LGB high school students.	• "LGB high school students in Kentucky **have higher rates of tobacco, alcohol, and illicit drug use, a major contributor to lifelong health disparities**. In addition, LGB youth have **lower rates of having an adult to talk to and higher rates of school related victimization** (eg, bullying, ever being threatened, or injured at school with a weapon)" (p. 224) • "Therefore, access to a supportive adult in the school setting may be particularly important for LGB students to prevent substance use" (p. 223)
Palmer, N., Kosciw, J. G., & Bartkiewicz, M. (2012). Strengths and silences: LGBTQ Students in Rural and Small Towns. *Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN).* https://www.glsen.org/research/strengths-and-silences-lgbtq-students-rural-and-small-towns	From Kosciw et al., (2015) Literature Review GLSEN Report	**Quantitative** (GLSEN National Survey) -Urban vs. rural comparative -Sample size: *N=8,158* LGBT students total	• "This research report examines the experiences of LGBT students in small town and rural areas on matters related to biased language in schools, school safety, harassment and victimization, educational outcomes,	• GLSEN Examining the experiences of LGBT students in rural areas	• "Nearly all LGBT students in rural areas **have heard homophobic, racist, sexist, and negative gender expression-based remarks"** (p. x). • "Rural LGBT students reported that **school staff members and students rarely intervened**

		N= 2,387 students in rural schools -"between 13 and 20 years of age, and most were White (78%) and identified as gay or lesbian (64%)" (p. ix)	school engagement, and LGBT-related resources and support" (p. ix).		when biased comments were heard" (p. x). • "Most rural LGBT students in this survey **felt unsafe in the past year** due to personal characteristics like sexual orientation, gender, gender expression, race, disability, or religion" (p. x). • "A **majority of rural LGBT students had been verbally harassed** because of their sexual orientation or gender expression, and **substantial numbers had experienced more severe physical harassment and physical assault** because of these characteristics" (p. x) • "LGBT students in rural areas, however, were **slightly more likely to miss classes or school** for safety reasons than urban and suburban rural students" (p. xi). • "Rural LGBT students **felt less connected** to their schools than suburban and urban students" (p. xi). • "However, rural LGBT students consistently **reported less access to LGBT-related support" (**p.xii).
Hall, W. J., & Rodgers, G. K. (2019). Teachers' attitudes toward homosexuality and the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and queer community in the United States. *Social Psychology of Education*, 22(1), 23–41. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11218-018-9463-9	[COLLEGE] Libraries *Social Psychology of Education*	**Quantitative** (General Social Survey Data) -Rural vs. urban comparative	• "In addition, this study sought to expand the literature by investigating how an array of demographic, geographic, and social variables relate to	• Educator attitudes regarding LGBTQ issues in school systems • Asked to rate: -morality of sexual relations between adults of the same sex	• "The urbanicity/rurality of the area teachers were in was unrelated to attitudes" (p. 34) • "Descriptive results presented in Table 1 showed that teachers' attitudes varied some- what depending on whether the

		-Sample size: N= 305 teachers Female-84.3% Male-15.7% Hetero-96.1% LGBQ-3.9%	teachers' LGBQ-related attitudes" (p. 28) • "In terms of geographic location, 38.4% of teachers were from the South, 22.3% were from the Midwest, 20.7% were from the Northeast, 11.1% were from the Pacific region, and 7.5% were from the Mountain region" (p.29) • "The level of urbanicity to rurality of the area participants lived in was measured using a 10-point scale that ranged from 0 (*large city*) to 9 (*open country*); thus, higher values indicate a more rural area" (p. 30)	-level of agreement/disagreement about the right to same-sex marriage -if a gay man should be allowed to make a speech in their community -if a gay man should be allowed to teach at a college or university -if a book written by a gay man sup- porting homosexuality should be removed from the public library	attitude item assessed the **morality** of homosexuality versus civil liberties and civil rights of LGBQ people" (p. 32) • "In terms of demographics, teacher age was positively associated with attitudes, thus, **older teachers tended to have more negative LGBQ attitudes than younger teachers"** (p. 32). • "In terms of religiosity, religious identification was unrelated to attitudes; however**, more frequent attendance of religious services was associated with more negative attitudes**. Further, **carrying one's religious beliefs into other areas of life was also associated with more negative attitudes"** (p. 34). • "Political orientation was strongly related to attitudes with **higher levels of conservatism associated with more negative LGBQ attitudes"** (p. 34) • "In terms of geographic area, teachers in the **Northeast and Pacific regions had significantly more positive attitudes than teachers in the South"** (p. 33)
Kosciw, J. G., Greytak, E. A., Giga, N. M., Villenas, C., & Danischewski, D. J. (2016). The 2015 national school climate survey: The experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and Queer youth in our nation's schools. *In Gay, Lesbian and Straight*	From Page (2017) Literature Review *GLSEN Report*	**Quantitative** (GLSEN National Survey) -Rural vs. urban comparative	• "LGBTQ students are a diverse population, and although they share many similar experiences, their experiences in school vary based on their	• GLSEN Examining the experiences of LGBT students in nations schools	• "LGBTQ students in rural/small town schools **reported hearing anti-LGBT remarks most often**" (p. xxiv). • "Students in schools in rural/small town areas **experienced the highest levels**

Education Network (GLSEN). https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED574780		-Sample size *N= 10,445* LGBT students *27.4*% rural LGBT students	personal demographics, the kind of school they attend, and where they live." (p. xxiii) • Rural or small town 27.4% of participants		**of victimization based on sexual orientation and based on gender expression**" (p. xxiv). • "Students in schools in rural/small town areas were **more likely to experience anti-LGBT discrimination** at school than students in suburban and urban schools" (p. xxiv). • "Students in rural/small town schools were **least likely to have LGBT-related school resources or supports,** particularly GSAs and supportive school personnel" (p. xxiv).
Kosciw, J.G., Greytak, E. A., Palmer, N. A., & Boesen M. J. (2014). The 2013 national school climate survey: The experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer youth in our nation's schools. In *Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN). https://www.glsen.org/research/2013-national-school-climate-survey*	From Bailey et al. (2022), Literature Review *GLSEN Report*	**Quantitative** (GLSEN National Survey) -Rural vs. urban Comparative -Sample size N= 7,821 LGBT students 29.4% rural LGBT students	• School Locale as a variable • Rural or Small Town 29.4% of their participants	• GLSEN Examining the experiences of LGBT students in nations schools	• "Students in rural/small town schools reported the **highest frequency of hearing anti-LGBT language at school"** (p.xxiv) • "Students in rural/small town schools experienced **higher frequencies of victimization in school based on sexual orientation and gender expression"** (p. xxiv) • "Students in rural/small town schools were **least likely to have LGBT-related school resources or supports,** particularly GSAs and supportive school personnel" (p.xxiv)
De Pedro, K. T., Lynch, R. J., & Esqueda, M. C. (2018). Understanding safety, victimization and school climate among rural lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ) youth. *Journal of LGBT Youth,*	EBSCOhost *Journal of LGBT Youth*	**Quantitative** (2013–2015 California Healthy Kids Survey)	• rural California district	• "…explores the relationships between multiple dimensions of LGBTQ affirming school climates, safety,	• "Overall, findings from this study show that **LGBTQ affirming school climates in rural school communities are with more positive**

15(4), 265–279. https://doi.org/10.1080/19361653.2018.1472050		Sample size *N=611* students *N=151* LGBTQ students *N=460* non-LGBTQ students		and victimization among LGBTQ students and non-LGBTQ peers…" (p. 266).	**perceptions of safety for LGBTQ** youth, consistent with prior research (Kosciw et al., 2013; Wimberly, 2015). This study found that within a rural district context **LGBTQ support, peer intervention, and teacher intervention were associated with higher levels of safety** among LGBTQ youth. Contrary to past research, the presence of **GSA's was associated with lower levels of safety**" (p. 274-275).

Policy Brief

Anti-Queer Policy & Rural Schools: A Framework to Analyze Anti-Queer Policy Implementation in Rural Schools

Clint Whitten
Courtney Thomas

There are more than 300 anti-Queer policies that are being proposed and implemented across the nation that impact education, including Tennessee's Senate Bill 1229; Virginia's *2022 Model Policies on the Privacy, Dignity, and Respect for all Students and Parents in Virginia's Public Schools;* and Florida's *Parental Rights in Education Bill* CS/CS/HB 1557, expanded April 2023, which prohibits topics of gender and sexuality in K-12 public education, unless related to reproductive health lessons. This brief offers a critique of three assumptions that can be applied to analyze how anti-Queer policies influence Queerness in rural schools. Our experiences that brought us to this topic: Clint Whitten grew up on a farm in Southern Virginia and is an openly Queer former middle school teacher in a rural serving school; Dr. Courtney Thomas is an openly queer Professor of Political Science from a rural community parenting an openly trans and nonbinary child in a rural school system.

Does the Policy Make Assumptions on One Type of Parent?

Schools shall defer to parents to make the best decisions with respect to their children. Schools shall partner with parents: Parents are a child's primary and most important educator (Virginia Department of Education, 2022, p. 2-3).

As demonstrated in the excerpt from 2022 Model Educational Policy, many anti-Queer policies are justified on the basis that parents' rights should be protected. Prioritizing parental rights within educational policy operates under the assumption that cis-heterosexual families are the only families that matter, and that they will make choices in the best interest of their children regarding topics on gender and sexuality. Families and caregivers who are Queer-identifying and who have Queer youth are erased from the narrative that creates a one-sided type of "parent" and "family." If these policies are enacted in communities that only value cis-heterosexual humans and relationships, then Queerness is further pushed from existence. Additionally, some families in rural spaces may wish to support their Queer child; however, based on the policy, those parents may be hamstrung to do so due to these restrictive policies. In other words, rural parents are not all the same. These policies purport to speak for "all parents" or defend parents' rights but some are left out.

Rural communities have Queer people inhabiting them (whether identifying currently or in the future) (Slepyan, 2021). Queer youth, educators, families and caregivers, and community members must be part of the policy conversation in order for schools to be places that accept and value every child and educator.

Queer students—regardless of where they live—are not isolated or protected from the homophobic and transphobic rhetoric and legislative movements sweeping the country. The lived experiences may be more pronounced for Queer people in rural areas (especially if they are hypervisible). Queer youth, parents, and educators may feel that they are personally threatened by things happening to Queer people elsewhere.

Another potential harm of these policies is an impact on the teaching workforce. As rural schools focus on teacher retention, these anti-Queer policies risk pushing more Queer educators and families out of rural schools. The experiences of rural Queer youth, educators, families, and caregivers differ from their urban and suburban counterparts because of the lack Queer-affirming visibility, curricula, and resources.

Furthermore, the assumption that every parent knows or acts upon what is best for their children is flawed. Courtney, the author, and parent of a trans child, reports that her trans child suffered for several years because—as a parent—she did not know that she needed to teach her elementary age children about nonbinary identities. A long overdue conversation about gender led to what Courtney's child calls "a breakthrough in those three years of

complete anger and sorrow and confusion," coming out as nonbinary, and social transitioning at home and at school. Courtney recognizes the harm she caused her child and maintains that even an affirming and accepting parent may not always know what is best for their child.

Partnerships between schools and families are critically important, but students need access to resources, language, and information that families may not be able or willing to provide. Beyond Queer-identifying people, rural communities also have affirming and supportive parents of Queer youth who are often excluded in the push for parental rights. As an openly Queer educator (Clint) and the parent of a Queer child (Courtney), we want (*need*) Queer youth to see themselves in the curriculum and to have affirming safe spaces; however, the anti-Queer policies have created spaces in which Queer existence is problematic and deemed as politically divisive.

Advocates and educators who wish to challenge assumptions about there being one type of parent or critique education policies for how they may be anti-queer can ask questions such as: *Are all parents considered?* And *how are schools and communities working together to support and listen to your Queer voices?*

How Does the Policy Define Gender and Sexual Identities?

The phrase 'transgender student' shall mean a public-school student whose parent has requested in writing, due to their child's persistent and sincere belief that his or her gender differs with his or her sex, that their child be so identified while at school. (Virginia Department of Education, 2022, p. 5)

The example above from Virginia's 2022 Model Educational Policy is an example of a policy that, in its failure to define gender and sexual identity, represents anti-Queer educational policy. The word choice is especially problematic. Being transgender is not connected to a persistent or sincere *belief* that *his* or *her* (which fails to include inclusive pronouns such as they/them and zie/zir) identity is different from their sex assigned at birth. The language also fails to be inclusive of intersex youth and educators. The language in this policy reveals an assumption that dismisses societal (and family) expectations, medical biases, and temporal fluxes that happen while exploring gender identity and sexual orientation.

These misleading, undefined, and sometimes contradictory policies, impact rural administrators in negative ways. Administrators in rural schools tend to wear many hats and play many roles (Preston et al., 2013). For administrators who are already overworked, it may be difficult to implement and comply with these rules that lack clarity. When policies define gender and sexuality in vague or unscientific ways, principals are left to interpret and apply the laws. In some cases, assumptions and stereotypes about gender and identity can impact curricular decisions—for example, a theater student who wishes to perform as a gender that does not align with their school records may be prohibited from doing so even though, historically, especially in Shakespearean times, actors played all genders and in small rural schools, students may need to play roles of other genders if not enough of one gender try out for the school play.

The Virginia example is one of many policies that require educators to report to families of any name or pronoun changes or any suspicion that students are not identifying with their biological sex. For example, Virginia Model Policy (2022) states,

> Parents are in the best position to work with their children and, where appropriate, their children's health care providers to determine (a) what names, nicknames, and/or pronouns, if any, shall be used for their child by teachers and school staff while their child is at school, (b) whether their child engages in any counseling or social transition at school that encourages a gender that differs from their child's sex, or (c) whether their child expresses a gender that differs with their child's sex while at school (p. 2).

While these policies harm non-binary and trans youth, they also have negative implications for all youth. Historically, for example, stereotypes have highlighted female-identifying youth who dress masculine as being "tomboys." Under these vague policies that fail to address gender expression versus identity, students are at risk of being outed to their families and caregivers whether they identify as Queer or not and without consideration for their safety. When school systems implement policies that enable or force teachers to report to parents when they "have reason to believe" that a student is identifying as a gender that does not conform to their school record, they may endanger that student.

These policies affect educators' autonomy within the classroom by deeming Queer existence as part of "controversial teaching issues" and those policies govern political activities and bodies of educators and

youth. When Queerness is made, by definition, "obscene," as it would have been by Idaho HB314 (2023), which bans materials that includes sexual content (e.g., "homosexuality"), it forces Queerness to hide within individuals and spaces and leads to educators and students to feel disconnected to their schools and communities.

When definitions are vague or difficult to implement, or when educators are told they may not support the students they teach or respect students' needs, these policies make it harder to recruit and retain educators who wish to teach in a caring, tight-knit, rural community, thus further exacerbating rural school teacher shortages.

When policies are proposed that would legislate how gender and sexuality are defined, advocates might ask *questions about how Queer terms are defined and used including whether any rural trans, intersex, and non-binary people have been part of the conservation when gender was getting defined and whether the terminology is consistently and defined with care.* Advocates might also ask: *Who are the policymakers proposing these policies?* and *What Queer-affirming training is there for the people creating and implementing these policies, specifically in rural areas?*

Will the Policy Erase Rural Queer Educators and Students?

When policies center the experiences of some parents over others, and use vague and conflicting definitions, Queer existence in rural spaces could become even more erased. As part of the larger discourse of Queerness in schools, conservative policymakers and political leaders call to ban books that have topics of sexuality explicit material and eliminate safe space stickers, pride flags and pride clubs. This erasure makes it difficult for Queer students to find each other and affirming adult support within their schools. When rural educators implement these policies in spaces that lack awareness, educators may experience greater discomfort levels with Queer topics and fear of getting in trouble from administrators, community members, and/or caregivers. This risks the potential of erasing a group of people from rural conversations, communities, and narratives.

These policies aim to erase Queer students and Queer subjects from the curriculum. In a state or school with anti-Queer policies, it might be against the rules, or at least feel risky, to plan units such as selecting a month to learn about LGBTQ+ leaders around the world or connections between LGBTQ+ rights movement and civil wars or read books about families that include same sex parents. In language courses, teachers might feel that they are not allowed to include nonbinary pronouns (including neopronouns like zie and zir) which gives students access to describe who they are.

These policies also influence participation on athletic teams. Not only are there numerous proposed and existing laws to prohibit the participation of transgender athletes on school teams, state governing boards can limit participation without legislative or executive action. For example, high school athletic teams often follow policies enacted and enforced by the Virginia High School League (VHSL), a non-profit organization whose members are an alliance of schools in Virginia. In 2014, the VHSL developed a transgender policy (28A-8-1) that allows transgender student-athlete participation with documentation including a written statement affirming the consistent gender identity and expression, letters from parents, friends, or teachers affirming the gender identification and expression, a list of prescribed and non-prescribed medications, and written verification from a healthcare professional regarding the student's gender identification. However, the Virginia Governor's *2022 Model Policies on the Privacy, Dignity, and Respect for All Students and Parents in Virginia's Public Schools* requires that "for any athletic program or activity that is separated by sex, the appropriate participation of students shall be determined by sex" (p. 18). Not only does the current VHSL policy exclude nonbinary and intersex students, it conflicts with the Governor's model guidance. The regulations are confusing, and the jurisdictions are unclear in ways that may prevent transgender student participation on school athletic teams and further alienate transgender students from their peers and communities.

In summary, for any law or policy that would impact students, it is important to ask: *Will the policy result in erasure? That is, will it make it harder for Queer kids and educators to simply exist?*

Implications/Conclusion

Utilizing Brenner's (2023) critical rural policy analysis as a foundation, a Queer framing can be applied to further this critical analysis framework. Brenner's piece operates as a foundation to ground rurality in conversation with anti-Queer policies. Similar to the ways in which Brenner challenges the assumptions and definitions of rurality, policymakers

and educators must be critical of the assumptions and definitions of gender and sexuality within policies. In this way, a critical rural Queer policy analysis framework can support Queer livelihood in rural schools who already face more challenges than their urban counterparts. As policymakers and educators navigate these oppressive and harmful policies, it is important to examine the purpose and ways in which parent-centric policies operate. A critical rural Queer policy analysis framework targets the ways in which cis-heterosexual values get reproduced under the assumption of being 'parent-centric,' engages with gender and sexuality definitions, calls on us to examine the ways in which Queerness is being erased from rural communities, and asks us to consider the how anti-Queer policies impact both Queer students and teachers alongside rural schools and communities—will they exacerbate teacher shortages, create danger for Queer students and teachers who may be more visible in rural spaces, or create mental health issues for rural youth in areas where there may be limited access to mental health care, and what other rural-specific consequences may be faced by schools and communities. Through this critical policy analysis, rural Queer-identifying youth, educators, caregivers, community members and Queer-affirming allies and advocates can challenge anti-Queer policies and (re)exist fully in rural schools.

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Manuscript 4

Cultivating a Sense of Place and Identity:

Exploring Rural Identity through a Place-Based Summer Enrichment Program for Rural Gifted Learners

Abstract

This case study explores how rural middle school youth describe their sense of place and rurality during a residential summer enrichment experience for gifted leaners. Using critical place-based pedagogy, the relationship of internalization and externalization of place (Bass & Azano, 2024), and hooks's (2012) *Appalachian Elegy* as the conceptual framework, I analyzed camper artifacts (e.g., poems, written work in journals, and art projects with written captions) from 81 campers from two summers. Then used extreme sampling to select 22 camper artifacts (from 21 different campers) that serve as exemplar artifacts representing themes found from the data corpus. The codes emerging from all data and exemplified in the 22 camper artifacts led to the development of three themes: (a) rural identity expressed as ecological cosmopolitanism, (b) campers explore rural plurality: foraging through a here and there, and (c) allusions illustrate rural literacies and anchors of place. This study addresses opportunity gaps for rural, gifted learners by illuminating the ways in which rurality is co-cultivated with identity while uplifting rural communities as vibrant, artistic, and joyful.

Keywords*: rural education, gifted education, identity, place-based pedagogy, middle grade, literacy*

Cultivating a Sense of Place and Identity:

Exploring Rural Identity through a Place-Based Summer Enrichment Program for Rural Gifted Learners

My home means happiness to me. My home has shaped me into a good Christian and fisherman.
[painting of a river with two trees running alongside] – Jack

So not only am I a country girl who likes
the wind in my hair
I also am a travel girl whose heart is
Everywhere
[painting of a heart with a sunset, palm tree beach, and mountains etched inside] – Toni

Dollar General is the mall. The. End.
[in a creative "book of etiquette"]- Elise

These brief captions were attached to various projects displayed for the families of 51 students as they arrived on the last day of camp (in Summer 2) to pick up their children. A slideshow of photos from the week circulated in the background, as families engaged with the campers' projects. Earlier that week, during the afternoon humanities portion of the enrichment camp, campers were invited to respond to a prompt:

> *As we pass through the humanities that celebrate how place influences us, select one of the ways below [list of humanities areas] to demonstrate yourself and your interpretation of place. Choose one that you feel most confident/connected to and use this opportunity to further develop your rural identity…This project is your opportunity to curate the story of your place! You get to tell your story – and what's cooler than that?*

The two instructors explained that the campers would have an hour each afternoon that week to create an artifact (e.g., music, art, skits, maps, theatre performances, books of etiquette) that explored their sense of place and identity. The camp supplied all materials. Apart from this in-depth project, campers also participated in various humanities-focused learning sessions

throughout the week: theatre workshops, technical theatre make-up application, movement and mediation, music composition, found art, tapestry weaving, poetry readings, leather artwork, and music performances.

The Summer Enrichment Experience at College (SEE College) is a week-long residential summer program for rural, gifted rising sixth and seventh graders. During the inaugural year (2022), the camp hosted 40 campers out of roughly 100 applicants. In 2023, out of over 150 applications, 41 new campers were selected, and 11 returning campers attended. Campers participate in a Food, Energy, Water (FEW) Nexus (Food and Agriculture Organization, 2014; Simpson, 2019) curriculum in the morning, humanities learning sessions in the afternoon, and then social programming, led by residential counselors, in the evenings. This camp addresses an opportunity gap for rural, gifted learners (Azano & Callahan, 2021; Kuehl et al., 2022) resulting from inequitable rural funding (Sutherland & Seelig, 2022) and fewer chances to participate in enrichment activities (Azano et al., 2021; Azano et al., 2020; Rasheed, 2019). This camp is primarily funded by a Jack Kent Cooke Foundation grant (Principal Investigator, Amy Price Azano) to minimize financial barriers for underrepresented youth experiencing poverty.

SEE College also addresses salient issues in rural education, including rural identity and combatting deficit thinking and stereotype threats (Azano et al., 2021; Donovan, 2016; Gray, 2009; Wray, 2006). As curriculum writers, we were intentional about addressing these issues as they relate to both research and literary expressions. In their description of the complex rural representations in the Whippoorwill awards (a literary awards program for rural young adult books), Parton and colleagues (2023) stated, “Growing up rural means taking on many societal and cultural perceptions and reconciling those with individual perceptions of identity” (p. 59). There is a misconception of a monolithic rural identity which contributes to rural stereotype

threats addressed in creative works, such as *Rural Voices: 15 Authors Challenge Assumptions About Small-Town America* (2020). In other works, such as Jamison's (2021) *Hillbilly Queer*, the monolithic narrative that rural communities are completely anti-Queer is challenged by presenting a memoir that celebrates the intersections of rurality and Queerness (Thompson & Whitten, in press). These monolithic disruptions are further described in research. In their study on how place influences identities for college students from rural spaces, Cain and Willis (2022) argued, "Nevertheless, the students' identities were interwoven and shaped by their rural experiences and backgrounds, and therefore, should not be ignored by education professionals" (p. 85). While place-based pedagogy centers a critical thinking of place, it must also be met with how rurality [place] acts as an identity, both identity and place being co-constructed within societies, histories, and communities' beliefs.

Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore rural, gifted 6th and 7th grade learners' descriptions of place and identity during a week-long, place-based summer enrichment camp. In this study, I explored two primary questions:

- How do rural gifted learners describe their sense of rurality (place) and identity when presented with a place-based humanities afternoon program?
- What feelings, memories, and images, focused on rurality and identity, are present in campers' artifacts when given various place-based humanities learning experiences?

Background Literature

Rural Gifted Learners

Gifted programs in rural schools face unique challenges when compared to nonrural schools, such as inequitable funding streams for rural education (Sutherland & Seelig, 2021; Kettler et al., 2015), challenges with the gifted identification process (Azano et al., 2017; Azano

& Callahan, 2021), disparities in staffing gifted teacher positions (Rasheed, 2019), issues of rural poverty (Lewis & Boswell, 2020; Tieken, 2022), and fewer out-of-school enrichment resources and opportunities (Callahan & Azano, 2019). In their systematic literature review of the intersections between rural education and gifted education, Rasheed concluded, "[collaboration] for effective identification, curriculum, and instruction for advanced students in rural regions is imperative for the sustainability of rural communities" (p. 79). Therefore, rural gifted learners often face more opportunity gaps as compared to gifted students in nonrural schools. This is reflected in the Showalter and colleague's "Why Rural Matters" report (2023) which found 40.7% of public rural schools do not have any enrichment specific program for gifted learners. This "absence of gifted and talented programs altogether" (Showalter et al., 2023. p.4) widens the opportunity gap for rural gifted learners as compared to opportunities for urban gifted youth.

Identity, Rurality, and Place

The importance of addressing this opportunity gap is also present in how place shape's identity development. Inherently, where we grow up influences our identity (Azano, 2011; hooks, 2008; Jamison, 2021; Whitten, 2023). Examples of that influence include what grows well around us to eat, the conversations we hear in communities and homes (Azano et al., 2021; Donehower, 2021), what we have access to, and what we see visually: they all shape our worldviews as we grow up and explore our own identities within schools (Verhoeven et al., 2019).This is especially true for people in rural communities in what scholars have described as the rural lifeworld (Corbett, 2007; 2005; Howley, 2003). This rural lifeworld strongly influences identity in communities where there is little in or outmigration and where they value local norms (Azano, 2011). It can also be the place where those identities are stereotyped as *rednecks*, *uneducated*, and *monolithic* (Carpenter, 2020). Carpenter (2020) argued, "Over and over again,

the story of a rural monolith— a uniform, like-minded population that share the same beliefs, value systems, identities, and political leanings— was told and accepted as truth" (p. xii). In more recent work while critiquing the data from *Rural White Rage*, Jacobs (2024) notes the impact of data misuse has on the rural-urban divide. Jacobs argues,

> By the time they even get to some warm-hearted conclusion on empowering rural community, they've so misrepresented and maligned rural people that nobody in the countryside can (or should trust them, and nobody inside urban America will find it worthwhile to care about some wasteland of hate (para 4).

Furthermore, Azano and colleagues (2021) addressed how these moments of deficit thinking and stereotype threats can influence which identities get to exist in rural communities. They described, "Sometimes, identities and life experiences create a frame of reference that may seem to conflict with other perspectives in your rural community" (p. 204).

Paulo Freire explored these concepts across his scholarship in critical pedagogies. In particular, his "banking model" (1970) of education is a useful construct for understanding the ways identities are valued and intersect with educational spaces. His banking concept addressed hegemonies and how power structures determined which knowledges are consumed and disseminated. As Azano and colleagues (2021) discussed in their text for preservice rural teachers, "out of school funds of knowledge may not always be recognized or appreciated in formal school settings" (p. 205). Later described in the conceptual framework for this study, place-based pedagogy works to address the value of place when it comes to exploring identity and cultivating critical thinking skills.

Those out-of-school or place-based funds of knowledge in rural places, particularly as they relate to culturally sustaining practices, are referenced as rural literacies (Azano et al., 2021;

Donehower, 2021; Parton, 2022). As Azano (2020) noted, "[P]lace is more than an empty (geographic) container that holds our histories and experiences. It becomes a place by the meanings we attach to it" (p. 117). In her ethnographic inquiry, Azano explored the balancing of place and identity by examining her father's relationship with hunting. She used the example of how each tree stand in her dad's hunting community has a special name and story attached to it. These placed experiences shaped how Azano understood her father's and her own rural identities. Using a place-based pedagogical framework, Azano presented an example from the New River, a regional landmark with geological significance left out of the local schools' curriculum, to explain how places get valued *or erased* (Eppley, 2011) in school curricula. If rural spaces are not incorporated into the curriculum and, thus, valued, then young people may not consider why *place* is an important aspect of their identity. Lastly, when describing a conversation of gay rights with her father, Azano (2020) noted that it took someone who her father "admired and respected–a hunting mentor," (p. 131) a purveyor of place, to help teach him a lesson of acceptance. This provides an example of how, in rural spaces, who we get our information from shapes how we learn and grow. Or, as Freire and Macedo (1987) suggested, long before we read the word, we learn to read the world.

Throughout these examples, place and rurality anchor identity development. Rural Queer studies also offer a point of inquiry into understanding the spectrum of how place and identity are co-constructed. Gray (2009) argued, "that rural queer youth rework their disorientation of self, in places that prioritize familiarity through codes of sameness, discourage claims of difference, and have relatively few local 'others' to turn to for queer recognition" (p. 168). In this example, place, coded with terms of sameness, cause rural Queer youth to reconsider their Queer identities which fall outside the norms and familiarity in community. This is further explored in

Azano et al. (2021) where they identified three main categories of where homogenous stereotypes get perpetuated and in turn influence identity:

(a) politics: in rural spaces of hyper-political values, teachers and students may hide their political identities;

(b) religion and spirituality: in rural communities where singular faith-based value systems are considered important, other religions may feel pushed out;

(c) sexual orientation and gender expression: in rural schools where a dominant idea (cis-heterosexuality) is considered norm, Queer youth and educators may not feel comfortable fully being themselves.

Queer rural studies address the role of visibility in terms of identity development (Whitten, 2023), how policies may lead to erasure of identity in schools (Whitten & Thomas, 2023), and the ways in which some identities have less access to identity-affirming resources (Kosciw et al., 2022; Thompson et al., 2024). Therefore, rurality is not only representative of physical spaces or “passive backdrops” (Gray, 2009, p. 167), but it is a site for identity construction and re-negotiation.

Summer Programs as Alternative Learning Environments for Rural Students

While gifted education programs in rural schools face issues of inequitable funding disparities and staffing challenges, alternative learning environments can serve to reduce opportunity gaps for rural learners. These opportunity gaps are especially critical in the summer months where academic enrichment opportunities may even be scarcer, which people call *the summer slide*—referring to loss of academic skills during the summer months (Johnson et al., 2021). O’Connell (2023) explored the influence of a summer enrichment program's effects on literacy learning during the summer months. Using a mixed methods approach (e.g., STAR

reading scores and open-ended questions), during a program originally designed for 5-8 weeks but shifted due to COVID-19, O'Connell's study not only found success in increasing students' reading scores but also acknowledged the importance of social interactions in the summer with rural youth (who may be geographically distant from their friends in the summer). These results illustrate the importance of academic and social programming existing for rural youth in summer months in order to address opportunity gaps.

Summer programs can also reduce the burden created by educational inequities during the school year. Leefatt (2015), for example, not only argued that summer learning is the "key to equality," but suggested that summer enrichment programs could help with the costs of re-teaching material lost during the summer and closing educational gaps for disadvantaged students. Johnson and colleagues (2021) expand this notion, explaining that rural students start school performing academically slightly better than their urban peers; however, by middle school those numbers begin to decline. They argued, "In particular, we show that rural/nonrural gaps appear to be growing more during the summer as students in rural schools are losing more ground" (Conclusion, para. 1). Therefore, the emerging background literature on summer alternative learning programs in rural spaces are focused on academic learning opportunity gaps and summer socialization opportunities.

Conceptual Framework

To understand the ways in which campers explore their identity and place throughout their artifacts, I build from three theoretical stances connecting identity and rural places. The first, place-based pedagogy, is a critical pedagogy that seeks to understand the relationship between education and where we inhabit. The second, from Bass and Azano (2024), navigates the ways in which students both internalized and externalized their understandings of place

through writing. And, finally, I use bell hooks (2012) to further situate this work in a sense of belonging explored through poetic voice focused on ecological cosmopolitanism.

Place-Based Pedagogy

To address how place influences our knowledge production and identity making, place-based pedagogy (re)values how place can be a space of education (Gruenewald, 2003). A critical pedagogy of place (Gruenewald, 2003) challenges assumptions and power structures of the past, present, and futures of place by asking what happens(ed) in this place or who gets to exist here? Azano (2020) described the significance:

> As a philosophical underpinning to any curriculum, a place-based pedagogy isn't only possible, it could potentially be an academic lifesaver for rural students, a regenerative source of energy or sustainability in the health of rural places. If kids growing up in the country only learn about concepts or places that are remote and distant to their real-life experiences, how will they find it relevant or engaging? Global competence has (understandably so) become increasingly important but should not come at the expense of understanding the local. (p. 128)

Critical place-based pedagogy is not only important for curricula; it also influences how rural students (re)engage with rural structural inequalities (Azano, 2011). Moreover, a critical perspective of place must be implemented when addressing the role of place in education. As Edmonson (2005) stated, "place-conscious education can and should begin to more explicitly attend to the dimensions and aspects of place" (p. 288). Therefore, when addressing place in education, a critical place-based pedagogy critiques monolithic narratives of placed [rural] identities. This pedagogy is meant to engage with the diversities of place and intersections of identities within perimeters of place to critique structures of power. A Critical place-based

pedagogy values local and regional knowledge while also holding people and histories of place accountable.

Big P/Place and Little p/place

Explored in Bass and Azano's (2024) *Reading and Writing Place: Connecting Rural Schools and Communities,* the big "P" (P/place) and little "p" (p/place) place concept refers to the externalization and internalization of place informing self and senses of belonging. Borrowing from familiar delineations of D/discourses (see Gee, 2014, 2015) and C/culture (Hall, 1976), P/place was developed to nuance place identities and understandings. P/place refers to larger narratives of place. As described in a metaphor, P/place are the branches and leaves of place that people see. For example, I may describe my externalizations of place as visible symbols: tractors, four wheelers, and a little Chevy truck as part of my P/place. Moreover, my P/place is also the rednecks and farmers that people see as central to the community; however, rural stereotype threat may lead you to think rednecks and farmers are uneducated and solely exist in torn-up blue jeans on a John Deere tractor. Within this example, my p/place, what I know to be internally, is that some of those farmers are politicians wearing suits and the most educated people when it comes to running a business and preserving the land. Farmers in my neck of the woods are close to elite status, not just some uneducated tractor drivers.

In conversation with P/place, p/place is concerned with the internalizations of place and is "what lies beneath the surface" (Bass & Azano, p. #). This could be what creates the feelings of safety in a community and the generational stories passed down that allow rural people to understand the narratives that have shaped their community. Conversely, p/place can also be where young people internalize harmful messages about place. Bass and Azano (2024) write about p/place as the "meaningful relationships that form our meaningful places" (p. #). When

articulating my sense of p/place, I instantly think about the stories of my grandmother and me on the white porch swing in the sunroom where she taught me cursive lettering in elementary school, or cautionary tales about how our river has holes in it that suck small kids under.

These internalizations and externalizations of place provide a point of inquiry into how place can inform identity formation in tandem with formation of place knowledge. Within these concepts of P/place and p/place, place engages with various discourse communities (Gee, 2015) that signal rurality and identity development. For example, in *Reading and Writing Place* (Bass & Azano, 2024), Bass explores how her softball community acted as a discourse community that allowed her to experience new connections to people from different areas and described how the diamond dirt field allowed players to find a mutual place of identity. In the student artifacts analyzed for this study, I found the same to be true—that students named (or drew) the communities in which their placed identities found meaning.

A Poetic Sense of Belonging as Informed by bell hooks' *Appalachian Elegy*

In connection to place-based pedagogy and "P/p" place, hooks's (2012) *Appalachian Elegy: Poetry and Place* further situates place and rurality within the main region of the study: Appalachia. hooks described, "Living my early childhood in the isolated hills of Kentucky, I made a place for myself in nature there—roaming the hills, walking the fields hidden in hollows where my sharecropper grandfather Daddy Gus planted neat rows of growing crops" (p. 4-5). Nature-centric landscapes flood her poetry and help to describe her own sense of identity and belonging. These place narratives are connected to what hooks described as "ecological cosmopolitanism," explaining: "Kentucky black folks who lived in the backwoods were deeply engaged with an ecological cosmopolitanism. They fished; hunted; raised chickens; planted what we would now call organic gardens; made homemade spirits, wine, and whiskey; and grew

flowers" (p. 2). Within the Kentucky Appalachian Black community, this ecological cosmopolitanism provided a discourse community of belonging organically and connected to sustaining the land. Ecological cosmopolitanism engages with how nature can be a producer of knowledge and fosters a "harmony with nature" in connection with identity and community development.

hooks's writing about a sense of belonging provides a necessary foundation when situating this study in a predominately Appalachia region and, given that most of the artifacts are poetic in nature, offers a lens to discuss how students navigated their own senses of belonging. The following poem serves as a grounding praxis to better understand ecological cosmopolitanism in operation.

my world is green
wild green
green with no limits
big bold greens
growing changing
celebrates the
green in things
all green goodness
65. bell hooks (2012)

It is worth noting how hooks illuminates the wild, vibrant, and untamed ideas of nature and how those may influence her epistemologies. The deep network to an ecological cosmopolitan, finding selfhood in nature, alongside place-based pedagogies and "P"/"p" place, helps to structure the framing of the data analysis and discussion.

Methodology

I approached this research through a case study methodology, a frequently used approach in qualitative research (Yazan, 2015). Yazan's comparative analysis distinguishes between three common approaches to case study, and I rely here on Merriam's (1998) approach, particularly as

it relates to setting up the case study design to include a literature review, conceptual framework, and purposive sampling. A case study is fitting here because of the bound nature of a residential summer enrichment camp which allows for a deeper opportunity to engage with the context, influence of place, people involved, and the given phenomena. In particular, I resonated with Merriam's constructivist approach and emphasis on holistic descriptive methods and the techniques for leading to data analysis. For example, as Yazan (2015) explains, Merriam's model of "consolidation, reduction and interpretation help the clear and concrete application of constructivism in analytic process more than impression and intuition" (p. 145). This understanding guides my own positionality within the context of this case study.

Context

The context for this study occurred over two summers (June 2022 and June 2023). The camp is modeled after the University of Virginia's Summer Enrichment Program (SEP), which existed for forty-five years before closing. During it's time, SEP served thousands of gifted students. SEE College initially partnered with SEP to address opportunity gaps for rural learners. As a graduate assistant with the PI of SEE College, I began working with the research team in the fall of 2021 to develop a week-long, place-based humanities curriculum for gifted rural middle school students. In the mornings, the campers participate in a variety of STEM activities with a focus on the Food, Energy, and Water (FEW) Nexus. Then, in the afternoons, the campers participate in a three-hour humanities program with various learning workshops. For the first year, I was the curriculum coordinator and lead teacher for the humanities curriculum. During the second year of camp, eleven campers returned and participated in a Year 2 humanities curriculum that I also designed and helped co-facilitate.

Year 1 Overview

During the planning of the first-year curriculum, we were guided by asking critical questions around the humanities and rural communities. This led us to develop questions that guided each day's main objective:

> "How can we celebrate place throughout the humanities, and how can such celebrations facilitate an examination of the human condition? How can we learn from other people's placed experiences in order to share our own human experiences?"

These questions were translated into each day's major focus. For example, during the week campers were tasked with considering questions, such as:

- What does theatre look like in your rural community? How can performing stories help us care about our places and others'?
- Who are the rural artists that you know of? What do they create?
- What music is uplifted and celebrated in your community?

Table 1 presents a brief overview of the year one sample agenda.

Table 1

Sample Year One Week Agenda

Day 1	Focus Area	Music and Movement
	Warm Up Question	*Thinking Prompt*: How do we (re)animate rural spaces through movement and music? What's your music of place and home? What music connects to you? Is it just square dancing or flat footing?
	Major Activities	*Yoga/Movement:* Campers practice yoga movements while thinking about how nature is connected to movement and allow us to ground ourselves. *Music Composition Workshop*: Campers work collaboratively to create an original piano piece while discussing music in place.
Day 2	Focus Area	Theatre in Place
	Warm Up Question	Thinking Prompt: Where do you see theatre in your community? What do you need to do theatre? How does theatre exist in rural spaces? Who is theatre for?

	Major Activities	*Performance:* Campers participate in a variety of acting activities that focused on movement, voice, and telling our stories of place through acting. *Stage Makeup:* Campers learn about technical theatre through learning about the artform of makeup by creating zombie skin.
Day 3	Focus Area	Found Art
	Warm Up Question	Thinking Prompt: Campers were visited by our poet-in-residence Nikki Giovanni who did a poetry reading and chatted about her own rurality.
	Major Activities	*Found Art Tapestry Weaving*: Campers create miniature tapestries using found materials such as yarn, buttons, nature, ribbons, pipe cleaners, etc.
Day 4	Focus Area	Creative Writing in Places
	Warm Up Question	*Thinking Prompt*: What rural stories have you read or heard of? How can creative writing be a space to uplift rural communities or critique them? What stories do you want to write?
	Major Activities	*Perspective Writing*: Campers explore the campus and local art gallery and create a story from the perspective of something present in nature or the artwork seen on the walk. *Spoken Word Poetry*: Campers consider how language/dialects/ author's voice/ tone can be used to uplift our writing by creating and preforming original spoken word poetry.
Day 5	Focus Area	Living Arts Gallery-Final Project Showcase
	Warm Up Question	*Thinking Prompt*: Where do we go from here? How can we keep celebrating rural spaces through the arts and what does that mean to our rural identities?
	Major Activities	*Showcase:* Campers collect their projects and collections of writing to be presented in a walk-through gallery for families arriving for pick up.

Two lead teachers (during year one, I was one of the teachers), both from rural spaces, facilitated the warm-ups and place cultivation project and participated in the activities with the campers. Each activity was led by a local expert: a yoga expert guided students through a grounding meditation and movement experience, a music composer co-wrote music with the campers, a local actress led a workshop in a black box theatre on campus, an art teacher taught

the campers how to weave tapestries using found materials, a stage manager showed campers how to apply zombie skin stage makeup, and poet-in-residence, Nikki Giovanni, led a craft talk and poetry reading.

Throughout the week, campers worked on a curation of place project. Camp provided requested materials (e.g., canvases, paints, clay) for projects. Those projects, along with any other items they produced during the week, were then displayed for families to see when they picked up their campers on the last day of camp.

Year 2 Overview

During the second year of SEE College, there were 11 returning campers and 41 new campers. While the 41 new campers participated in the year one curriculum, the returning campers were given a new place-based, humanities focused curriculum. As we were developing the second-year curriculum, we were critically concerned with how to sustain rural joy, art, and storytelling. This led to the following overarching question:

- Through the humanities and by understanding the value of place, how can communities continue to thrive, be revitalized, or center joy by critically understanding our own sense of place while also valuing place narratives from others? What does it look like to sustain rural identity in the humanities?

The eleven year-two campers mostly participated in the warm-up with the year one campers and the two leading teachers. Again, each activity was led by a place-focused educator: a local sculptor used found materials to tell stories of place, a college student (and counselor) presented her grant research on the role of monuments in Appalachia, an expert in string instruments in Appalachia performed for the campers, the director for the hip-hop studies program challenged campers with how music connects different places, a leatherwork artist co-

created leather bracelets with the campers, and another poet-in-residence, George Ella Lyon, did a small group workshop with just the returning campers (n=11) after doing a craft talk and poetry workshop with all fifty two campers the day prior.

Table two illustrates the sample weekly agenda for the returning campers.

Table 2

Sample Year Two Week Agenda

Day 1	Focus Area	Symbols and Storytelling
	Warm Up Question	Creative Prompt: Campers will read/listen to George Ella Lyon's "where I'm from..." poem, discuss what symbols and stories remind them of home, and then create their own "where I'm from..." poem.
	Activity	*Monuments, Arts Symbols*: Campers learn about sculptures created from found material in nature from a local sculptor artist. Then they listen to an intern with the Monuments Across Appalachia project who also leads them in an activity that allows campers to create their own monuments of place. Hip-Hop Studio: Campers visit the hip-hop studio to learn about how music can create and validate community.
Day 2	Focus Area	Poetry and Music
	Warm Up Question	*Thinking Prompt:* Campers participate in an improvisation activity that outside.
	Activity	*Visiting Author*: George Ella Lyon, this year's poet-in-residence, will read a couple of poems and then lead campers through a writing activity. The writing activity is a mini-house writing exercise that allows campers to think about their homes and memories embedded in those spaces. *Music Connection:* Following the poetry workshop, a local Appalachian musician will lead the campers through the history of string instruments in Appalachia and perform for them.
Day 3	Focus Area	Spoken Storytelling and Poetry in Place
	Warm Up Question	*Thinking Prompt*: Teacher choice

	Activity	*Visiting Autho*r: Lyon will guide the camper through a writing exercise connecting the campers' birthdays to the Ogham Alphabet—the Celtic Tree calendar. Campers may write about how their tree connects to themselves or their senses of place. *Hip-Hop Studios:* Campers return to the hip-hop studios to create oral histories through music and recording.
Day 4	Focus Area	Leatherwork Braiding and Video Storytelling
	Warm Up Question	*Thinking Prompt*: When we love our homes, we can hold them accountable. Community sharing through writing or discussion. What hopes or challenges does your home present?
	Activity	*Leather Artwork*: Campers learn how about the history of leather work in rural, Appalachian communities and then create their own braid leather work bracelets with a local leatherwork legend. *Video Storytelling*: Campers can either create a film documenting the camp or their homes or create a piece of lore about the camp experience to understand the importance of storytelling within places.
Day 5	Focus Area	Place-Based Museum Exhibition
	Warm Up Question	No warmup—setting up for showcase
	Activity	Campers, present in a showcase for families, a collection of work they have been curating throughout the week.

All participants and teachers were encouraged by the curriculum developers (through various discussions and meetings) to center rurality (place) in their activities, and all "visiting experts" were friends, former co-workers, or family (except for Nikki Giovanni in year one and George Ella Lyon in year two— although now they may consider us one).

Participants

Between the two years, SEE College hosted 92 rising 6th and 7th graders (though 11 of the 92 were returning campers in year 2 for a total of 81 different campers, see Table 3 for clarification). From both years, the camp has represented approximately 15 fifteen different counties across southwest Virginia and northwestern North Carolina. We sent camp application

information to various networks of gifted resource teachers, local educational agencies, and via social media. Campers had to complete an application to be accepted; year one yielded close to 100 applications, and year two received more than 150 applications. Table 1 presents the gender breakdown from both years and Table 4 uses the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) locale coding to provide a categorization of where campers attend school.

Table 3

Gender of Campers Based on Pronouns from their Applications

Year	Male Identifying	Female Identifying
Summer 2022 (n=40)	20	20

Year	Male Identifying (New)	Female Identifying (New)	Male Identifying (Returning)	Female Identifying (Returning)
Summer 2023 (n=52)	21	20	7	4

Table 4

Locale District Codes from the School Campers Attended (Using National Center for Educational Statistics)

Year	Rural Remote	Rural Distant	Rural Fringe	Town Remote	Town Distant	Suburban Small	Suburban Medium	City Small
Summer 2022 (n=40)	4	19	11	-	1	1	-	4
Summer 2023 (n=52)	3	27	7	1	9	1	1	3

SEE College did not collect additional demographic information related to race or ethnicity during the application process; however, the majority of campers presented as white, and many students, families, and recommenders mentioned the possibility of the camper becoming a first-generation college student. Student artifacts were collected from both years.

Data Collection Methods

The techniques that were used to collect the data were collection of artifacts (detailed below), daily observations, interactions with the campers, and detailed field notes (for Year 2 only). These methods contribute to the holistic nature of a case study research design, including the active participant researcher position explained later in more detail. As further explained in my data analysis plan and in my researcher positionality, the field notes, interactions, and daily observations also connect to my abductive coding. Table 5 is a visualization of my methods (Weaver-Hightower, 2019):

Table 5

Data Collection Procedure and Collected Products

	Procedures for Data Collection	Products
Summer 2022	*Involvement throughout the week* • Co-taught warm-ups using Nikki Giovanni Poems • Observed groups in their learning sessions • Introduced and helped brainstorm projects with the campers for their end of the week curation of place project • Led place-based spoken word poetry workshops	• Active researcher observation notes • Artifacts (photos and samples of writing) • Reflection notes on curricula (changes done during camp)
	Final Curation Project • Campers displayed their curation of place projects for the families to see during pick up	• Artifact collection (camper projects) • Transcribed the captions from photos of final projects
Summer 2023	Involvement throughout the week • Observed warm-up led for all campers lead by humanities instructors • Attended activities with the Year 2 campers. Mostly they were led by local experts; however, I did help lead some activities • Created iMovie trailers around SEE College camp lore (advertising)	• Monument project examples (artifacts) • Poetry writing samples: "where I'm from" (all campers); George Ella Lyon Day 1 (all campers); George Ella Lyon Day 2 (returning campers n=11) • iMovie film trailers • Observations and daily field notes taken and then scribed at

	• Attended writing workshops with George Ella Lyon and the group—sometimes writing with the students	the end of camp. Warm-up notes were collected in field notes
	Final Curation Project • Observed and viewed the new campers (n=41) artifacts during their showcase while families arrived for pick up	• Artifact collection (projects) • Transcribed the captions from photos of final projects

Positionality and Researcher as Participant

Prior to coming to this research, I was a middle school English, creative writing, and theatre teacher within the community where this camp takes place. Therefore, a majority of the local experts and instructors that participated were also my colleagues and friends. The director of the camp referred to the afternoon sessions as “Clint and Friends.” Moreover, I grew up on a small farm in central southern Virginia; I would have applied to this camp growing up.

During the first summer (2022), not only did I co-design the humanities curriculum, but I also co-taught the warm-ups, participated in the rotating activities, and led the project time during the humanities time slots. I also helped lead some of the evening social activities, drove the vans around to STEM field trips, and shared meals with the campers. My intention was for the campers to perceive my involvement as a community educator rather than an administrator, researcher, or teacher. This was important because, while I was the adult in the space, I also wanted to be intentional about hierarchies of power getting created and how that may translate to the campers.

During the second summer (2023), as I planned for my dissertation study more explicitly, I had an even greater role in designing the curriculum for the returning 11 campers. We hired two replacement teachers to lead the Year 1 curriculum with 41 new campers, while I observed the returning campers as they engaged in the learning experiences designed for them. Each day, the two instructors led a warm-up for all students; therefore, my field notes for warm-ups include

all campers. After warm-ups, I would go with the 11 returning campers to their in-depth learning sessions; these campers remembered me from the previous year, which meant we had an established sense of trust and were quick to carry on conversations and felt comfortable sharing ideas. While I was not as involved with the humanities curriculum for the new campers, I still spent meals, afternoons, and evenings with campers as they participated in social activities.

Data Analysis

While I had an integral role in developing curricula and spent a significant amount of time with the campers, only written artifacts and artwork were analyzed; however, I acknowledge that my observations of, and relationship with the campers, influenced analysis. I cannot change my participant role (Coffey, 2018)—nor would I want to. My deep understanding of the camp and the campers allowed me to make sense of the data. That said, by looking only at written and artistic artifacts, I attempted to control for some of the biases and personal information (e.g., having to purchase clothes and shoes for campers) that came along with helping to develop and run the camp. Therefore, I followed the following data analysis plan:

Step 1

First, I completed an initial viewing of all written and visual artifacts. This included students' written work from journals, poems, and captions of visual artwork and the actual physical projects. I also reviewed and, when able, paired my field notes and photos/videos to better situate the artifacts within the context of the camp environment.

During this initial review, I generated reflective memos. This included writing down contextual information – something I knew about the camper or the artifact that was not otherwise apparent; however, mostly I noted features of the artifact and/or how they described their sense of rurality and identity in the artifacts. For example, one artifact is a small drawing

that features a farm, field, and curvy road paired with a found art weaving tapestry with a caption that reads, “This map represents the farm I live/work on and the weaving reminds me of home because of the flowers blooming.” The research memo read: *beauty in home/nature—flowers blooming,* and *work/lifeworld connected to farm life*. This initial review of data was inductive where I first assessed data generated from all campers across two summers (total artifacts n=62). For both years, some campers took their notebooks and projects home before I could record their data. From this review, I developed themes that emerged from my observations and reflective memos.

Step 2

Following the initial inductive review, I used purposeful, extreme case sampling (Marshall & Rossman, 2016) to identify 22 exemplary artifacts that highlight the ways in which students describe their sense of place and identity. From the larger sample of 62 artifacts, I chose these 22 artifacts because they best represent the main point of the research question. I rely on purposeful, extreme cases sampling in order to “learn from highly unusual manifestations of the phenomenon of interest” (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 115). This sampling is valuable not only due to the scale of data from 81 campers across two years, but it is also appropriate because it allowed me to examine the most illustrative examples of the inquiry focus for this study. Therefore, I highlight the sample of artifacts that best exemplify the themes identified in step one of data analysis. For instance, one camper wrote a poem about dropping their toothbrush in the toilet. This was not selected as an exemplar text even though the camper thought of their sense of home and place because it did not connect to rurality; however, the text, “I am from trees everywhere / (Green, fresh//smells like heaven) / I am from Oak trees / the forest / whose grass is

green and tall" was selected based on the rich description that highlighted a similar nature-centric landscape.

While analyzing the exemplar artifacts, I used abductive reasoning (Coffey, 2018) to better tell the narrative of camp, the students, and their projects. While inductive allows me to broadly explore and develop codes from the data, abductive reasoning allows for both inferences and relying on deductive theoretical frameworks that I come to the data analysis with (Thompson, 2022). This allowed me to use my inferences as an involved camp program developer who knew these campers well while also referring to my field notes and photos that I have collected. For example, one camper wrote about being from a quiet place and composed an original clarinet song called, "Slow Road." By using abductive reasoning, I was able to expand his artifact to include earlier conversations with him that week, which enhanced the overall context for the artifact. From these multiple steps of data analysis, I developed three themes: (a) rural identity expressed as ecological cosmopolitanism, (b) campers explore rural plurality: foraging through a here and there, and (c) allusions illustrate rural literacies and anchors of place.

Thematic Findings

After identifying common themes throughout all the data (n=62 artifacts), 22 exemplary artifacts were selected for further analysis and are used in this section to substantiate findings (See Appendix A for all written artifacts, rural codes, and camper pronoun usage). Throughout this section, I use a parenthetical notation to indicate the camper and their rural locale (see Appendix B which includes the NCES locale codes and their definitions).

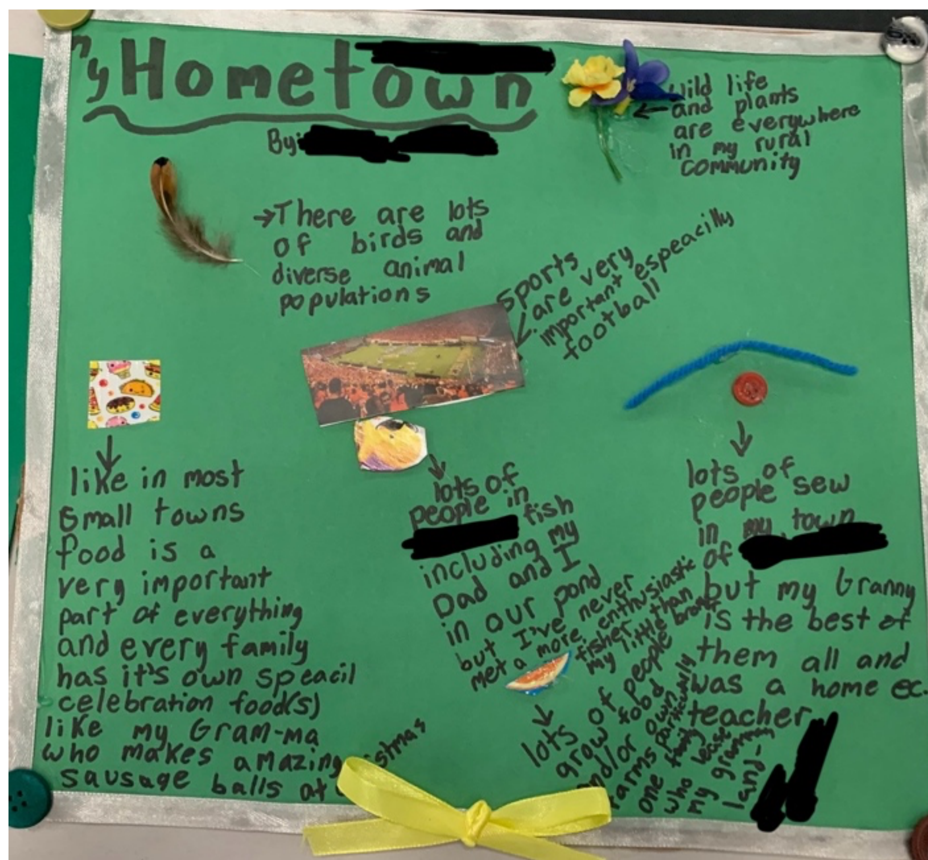
Rural Identity Expressed as Ecological Cosmopolitanism

The first thematic finding, campers' artifacts engaging in ecological cosmopolitanism (hooks, 2012), was overwhelmingly evident in the majority of written and visual artwork

artifacts. hooks argued, “Human ideas of place and space, a contemporary focus on watersheds, become both models and metaphors” (p. 2). In other words, ecological cosmopolitanism engages in how our sense of place influences our concepts and abilities to imagine the world around us; it explores how place shapes our language (e.g., metaphors) and emphasizes the idea of the human living wild in harmony with nature (hooks, 2012).

Campers wrote and created images centered around nature: trees, wheat fields, rivers, cornfields, and “diverse animal populations.” One camper (See Figure 1) highlighted her connection to nature by writing, “Wildlife and plants are everything in my rural community” (Camper #1, RR).

Figure 1: *Camper Artifact: Hometown Collage*



This nature-centric imagery carried through other artifacts. For example, one camper wrote, "There is grass up to your knees / and you can always take a walk in the trees!" (Camper #17, RD). This excerpt illustrates how the camper either connects to fields of grass uncut (e.g., wheat fields) or hyperbolizes the tallness of grasses while also showing the ease of simply taking a scroll in the trees.

Another camper wrote, "I'm from trees everywhere / green fresh smells like heaven" (Camper #10, RD), and, another stated, "I am from ground hog holes / the deep ones the roots sticking out like my toes" (Camper #2, CS). These examples illustrate how rich plant life rooted in soil signaled home to these campers who live in/near natural ecosystems. Moreover, fields of agriculture plants (e.g., wheat) were described in abundance. One camper wrote, "My project shows a field because there are so many in [location]… My painting is a story of a wheat field happily growing" (See figure 2; Camper #6, RD).

Figure 2: *Camper Artifact: Happy Little Wheat Fields*

In the latter example, not only did a nature centric imagery signal place/home, but it also presents an affective feeling of happiness, which is further presented in the poetic line, "I am from the

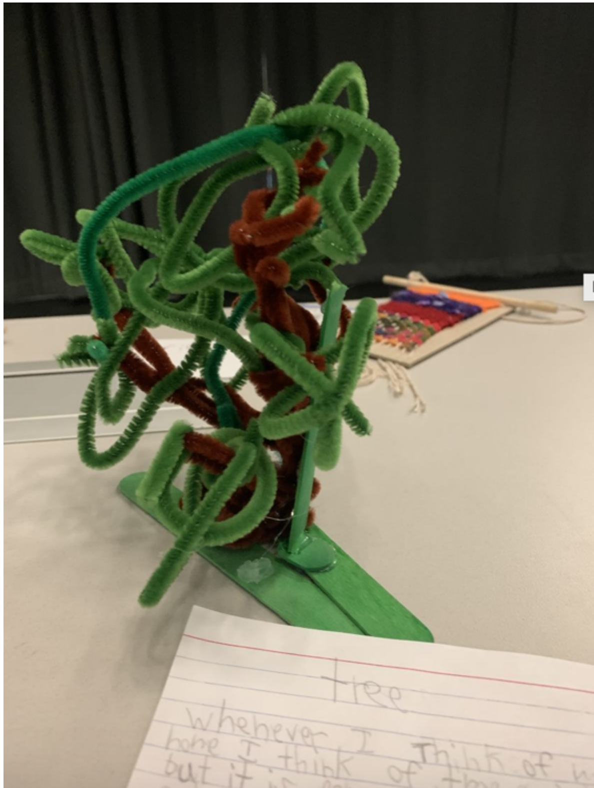
peaceful trees" (Camper #18, RF). Peacefulness and happiness are affective, emotionally connective strains the campers conveyed when describing their eco/nature-centric, rural spaces. This connection of nature and identity was presented in one camper's art project where she created a piece of art showcasing her favorite hobby, sports, while connecting it to her sense of place with chickens and pigs playing football with a scoreboard that read *Pork's Beef Chops, 12* and *Fried Chicken, 8* and a caption that read, "My project shows wheat field with animals playing sports and I play sports too" (Figure 3, Camper #15, RR).

Figure 3: *Camper Artifact: Pork Chops versus Fried Chicken Football*

Campers uniquely placed value on nature and wildlife, even if they felt like they did not come from a lot. For example, one camper wrote, "I'm from nowhere special / from trees to grass" (Camper #11, RD) while another created a tree out of pipe cleaners with the caption, "Whenever I think of my home I think of the rednecks and trees but it is easier to make a tree out of pipe

cleaners than to make rednecks” (Camper #22, RD, Figure 4). In these examples ecological cosmopolitanism, humanity and nature are co-valued (or de-valued) while also signaling to the rural campers that nature is a purveyor of livelihood and knowledge.

Figure 4: *Camper Artifact: Pipe Cleaner Tree*



Perhaps Heise’s (2008) contested concept of eco-cosmopolitanism, focusing on creating environmental world citizens, provides the possibilities of fostering ecological cosmopolitanism for rural youth who seem to already connect eco-nature centric care into their sense of identity. In other words, when given the opportunity to consider place and identity, these rural youth (re)planted themselves alongside the fields, trees, and wildlife that they got to cultivate within themselves growing up. As one camper described, “I am from Oak trees, the forest/Whose grass is green and tall” (Camper #10, RD). Being from nature, agriculture fields, and an active wildlife not only were centered when considering their place, but they were emphasized as important to

their upbringing, sense of home, and developing rural identities. In consideration of rural identities and cultivation of place (in regard to land), one may consider: What does it look to uplift agricultural spaces in curriculum for rural youth to feel grounded and rooted in their own education?

Campers Explore Rural Plurality: Foraging through the Here and There

The next theme explores how campers articulated rural pluralities (e.g., I'm rural and…), engaged with creating a "here/there" binary of place, and made comparisons between urban and rural communities. Campers engaged with externalizations of place while also delving into their 'insider knowledge' of p/place. For example, in one camper's "book of etiquette," the number 4 rule was: "Dollar General is the mall. The. End. It LOOKs just like the mall; has everything the mall has, and as a plus, it allows animals! Better than the mall" (Camper #14, RD). Within this example, the camper jokingly compared Dollar General to a mall, making clear that the student perceives the mall to be a more urban or suburban concept (as in, it is difficult to imagine someone comparing a suburban mall to a rural Dollar General). When describing his rural home, one camper wrote, "Not modern cities am I from / but a peaceful place. I am from where internet isn't developed / where deer have little space." (Camper #20, RD). This camper described the external perceptions of cities as places that get to be modern and internet-bearing but, internally, rural spaces are peaceful and home to an overcrowded deer population. These comparisons are important because of the ways they rely on a sense of metronormativity to (re)construct binaries of place, rural and urban, within their own rural identities.

However, not all students made comparisons to an urban (or otherwise nonrural) area. Several camper artifacts illuminated a "here/there" binary of place where campers felt their "place" was not valuable or they wished to leave. In a poem, one camper, wrote, "I'm from

nowhere special//from trees to grass" (Camper #11, RD). In this brief line, he internalizes his rural sense of place to be considered unimportant. These tensions with place were highlighted in another poem: "[Location] smallest//town of all but sometimes / I wish I was away from / all the fog, away, away" (Camper #21, TD). This student came from an urban town located deep within a rural surrounding region, but also highlighted a sense of wanting to leave, escape, or explore. These examples could also articulate the feelings of getting to be away and how awayness provides a sense of curiosity and longing (Biddle et al., 2019).

These place binaries are further complicated in following poem,

> "I am from the countryside horseback / riding and all / I am from the summer sun and the / breeze of the fall / But that's not the only side of me / No, I have two / I have the countryside of me / and I also travel the blue / I have a mountain part of me / and the beach part is so much fun /A forest part of me and a heart for / the tropic sun / So not only am I a country girl who / likes the wind in my hair / I am also a travel girl / who's heart is everywhere" (Camper #12, rural private, See Figure 5 for drawing).

Figure 5: *Camper Artifact: Country and Travel Girl*

In this example, when considering place, this camper dichotomized her identity into two categories: her love for traveling and living in the country. She described her sense of identity and place within a scaling binary. She has a mountain, forest, countryside and wind-in-her-hair side and a travel-girl side that made her feel connected to the beach and tropical sun. These dualities of her place-hood, (e.g., countryside/traveling, mountain/beach, forest/tropic) provide a critical look into how youth internalize rural spaces and how traveling influences concepts of home/place and identity. For example, being a country girl may not be associated with traveling but hints that rurality, as with any identity, has sundry intersecting possibilities and rural people are never just one thing.

These dichotomies are further explored in a collaborative poster, where two students also present the tensions of here/there with place. One camper wrote,

> "I have lived there for about 6 to 7 years basically my whole life. It's home. If you are wondering, why exactly are South Korea and China on my project, here's my answer. I have two places that I call home. [Location] county, where I live, breathe, eat, and play. And, my grandparents' house in [Location], South Korea Korea is my extended home. China is on my project because my pal [name] and I worked together. It is a collaboration between South Korea, China, and the United States. My home(s) have shaped me, determined who I am. Because of my family in Korea, I can speak two languages." (Camper #4, RR)

Meanwhile, her partner's caption read,

> "I am from [Location], China. I was adopted before I turned 2. To me home is a special place where I can have fun and be myself. My home has shaped me to the person I am through love, care, and friends. My project represents where I came from and where I am

now. The cherry walk way is a photo my parents took when they were in China and the drawing of the house is where I am." (Camper #5, RF, Figure 6)

Figure 6: *Camper Artifact: Korea, China, and Rural United States*

The collaborative poster featured both urban and rural landscapes. Within this example the pluralities of rurality were shaped by family members and a history of adoption. Rows of trees and cherry blossoms shared the space with images of cities. Within this project, the campers noted how these images of home reminded them of how their place identities shape their emotions (e.g., care, love), sense of belonging (e.g., be myself), and their language (e.g., multilingualism). This further may signal how place and identity both operate within states of flux; both are constantly shifting and changing while co-constructing our knowledges of ourselves and place.

Allusions Illustrate Rural Literacies and Anchors of Place

The final thematic finding explores how artifacts and writing samples signaled rural literacies (Azano et al., 2021; Donehower, 2022) and place anchors (Ho, 2020), and how those place anchors extended into other rural discourse communities. Rural literacies, briefly defined, are concerned with "literacy's potential connections to managing rural identity, building social capital, promoting social justice, and prioritizing rural schooling (Donehower, 2022, p. 187). Place anchors, as described by Ho (2020), are "what situate us in the intersecting identities of place, telling us more about ourselves and the world we inhabit" (p. 58). In this theme, campers demonstrated rural literacies and described place anchors within their artifacts through several methods. Campers reflected on stories of place which influenced affective connections and "emotional investment" to place (Scannell & Gifford, 2010); co-generated discourse communities connected to rural contexts; and mentioned creations of belief systems anchored to their rural communities. To begin, many campers highlighted stories of place that were grounded in their own rurality. For example, one camper wrote,

> "I am from church down the road / I am from tall trees and long country roads…I'm from a Christian family / with a Bible in hand / and so much I still don't know.... I'm from Subway and McDonalds / French fries and great coffee / From the death of my great grandfather / who fought for our country." (Camper #9, RD)

Within this poem, the camper noted the story of her grandfather fighting in a war and mentioned her connection to her religious upbringing by noting her Christian family, the church down the road, and having a Bible in one hand. These stories of place (i.e., grandfathers and church life) anchored this camper in their sense of identity and place.

Other campers also explore concepts of stories and symbols being connected to their sense of place. For example, one camper explored her stories of place by writing,

> "Like in most small towns food is a very important part of everything and every family has its own special celebration food(s) like my gramma who makes amazing sausage balls at Christmas…lots of people sew in my town of [Location] but my Granny is the best of them all and was a home ec. [economincs] Teacher… lots of people grow food and/or own farms particular one family who lease my grandmas land-The Matthews[8]" (Camper #1, RR).

This camper created stories of place traditions by writing about her family's special food celebration (amazing sausage balls), the history of her granny being the best sewer because of her home economics teaching experience, and the land leased by the Matthews (pseud). In another poem a camper wrote the story of her neighbor: "hear up on that / hill is a store where old / man Joe runs that store / it one of an important store" (Camper #21, TD). The story of old man Joe running the important store up the road presented a narrative that allowed this camper to connect back to place. The lore of old man Joe became a fixture in her sense of identity and place. In other examples, *rednecks* became the people of the campers' sense of place. One camper wrote, "whenever I think of my home, I think of the rednecks and trees" (Camper #22, RD), while another captioned their project with, "What my town means to me is redneck central" (Camper #13, RD). It may be worth noting that in these few examples of rednecks being their people of place, the campers did not seem to associate rednecks as a deficit. The camper in the latter example continued by noting, "My project says county fair and butchers. I am telling a story of how the people in my town make money" (Camper #13, RD). Within this caption, the camper valued the ways in which people make money in their community while potentially alluding to rurality through county fairs and butchers.

[8] This is a pseudonym to protect the identity of the camper.

Entwined in these rural literacies, campers emphasized the role of discourse communities, in particular food and hobbies, to their understanding of place and identity. When describing their place, one camper wrote, “I am from fishing rods / I am from burgers and steak / I am from biscuits and eggs / These are the things I am made of” (Camper #3, RD). Another camper described, “I am from country music / baked potatoes and tomatoes” (Camper #8, TD). These moments of using food to describe a sense of place operated to potentially connect campers to new discourse communities using food (e.g., how do people use potatoes in different places), while also presenting a possibility in these foods signaling a rural discourse community (e.g., burgers, steak, biscuits, baked potatoes, and tomatoes remind me of my own rurality).

Discourse communities and rural literacies were also present in their examples using hobbies. Softball was present in numerous artifacts; One camper wrote, “I am from riding my horse / I am from getting home late from softball games” (Camper #8, TD) and other noted, “I am from playing softball anywhere” (Camper #10, RD). Another popular hobby that centered campers’ sense of place was fishing. Camper #1 (RR) noted that many people fish in her community, “but I’ve never met a more enthusiastic fisher than my little brother.” Another camper used the first line of his poem to declare “I am from fishing rods” (Camper #3, RD), while another camper wrote, “My home has shaped me / into a good Christian and fisherman” (Camper #19, RR). In the examples of discourse communities connected with hobbies like fishing and playing softball, students bridged senses of place within a rural context. This was explored in Bass and Azano’s (2024) concept of P/place and p/place, where Bass described how the softball field became a discourse community in which she engaged in and, in turn, further explored rurality through this discourse community.

These rural literacies and anchors to place often exploited affective emotions (Scannell & Gifford, 2010) connected to place, such as peaceful, happy, adventurous, and calmness, in campers' artifacts. Camper #16 (RD) described his project as, "To me, home is a quiet place you're familiar with. Because of where I live and what home means to me I like quiet life and don't like many people. My project is about a quiet, slow Main Street" (Camper #16, RD). Familiarity and quietness presented an affective connection to place through a feeling that is provoked when considering home. It is worth noting that in this example the camper wrote, "don't like many people," which could be connected to a conversation I noted earlier in the week. Earlier that week, the camper described where he was from and said to a group of campers quietly, "I'm from getting called a [f slur] at every baseball game*"* (Field Notes). This additional context provides a possible rationale of not liking many people and wanting a quiet life.

Meanwhile, other campers wrote lines and captions, such as "My home means happiness to me (Camper #19, RR), "My home means peace. It has shaped me to be calm and happy" (Camper #7, TD), "[location] this makes me feel adventurous and happy (Camper #15, RR), and "There is so much fun to be had / even if there is no sand" (Camper #18, RF), which all emphasized a place that carries with it calmness, happiness, excitement, and wonder. Stories of place, rural discourse communities, and affective connections illuminate the role of rural literacies and how those literacies can influence identity development through foundational experiences created through hobbies, food, emotions, belief systems, and place-narratives.

Discussion

This research sought to explore how rural gifted learners described their sense of rurality (place) and identity when presented with a place-based curriculum by exploring the feelings, narratives, memories, and images, focused on rurality and identity, that were articulated in

campers' artifacts. After an initial inductive analysis of 62 artifacts, twenty-two exemplar artifacts were selected because they best demonstrated the emerging collective themes that came from all the campers. Thematic findings showcase how campers engaged with a rich understanding of ecological cosmopolitanism, presented pluralities of rural identities while navigating a "here/there" feeling, and reflected on their own rural literacies and place anchors through various discourse communities.

Ecological cosmopolitanism engages in conversation nature and humanity. hooks (2012) argued, "They [backwoods folks] were not wanting to tame the wildness, in themselves or nature" (p. 1). The campers, when given an opportunity to describe their sense of rurality (place) and identity, consistently mentioned their own identities in conversation with their natural surroundings; their places and selfhood got to remain wild and untamed through a freedom of creation. However, these nature-centric images also remind us, researchers and educators, that place and rurality are still contextual (e.g., these campers are mostly from rural, central Appalachian regions). In other words, there is geographical diversity (Azano et al., 2021) in rural spaces that may not be signaled by trees and wheat fields. Azano and colleagues (2021) emphasize this importance by stating, "Generalizations of rural geographies, and sometimes official definitions, distort the multiple realities of rural communities" (p. 37). Nonetheless, nature was heavily leveraged when considering rurality (place). Rural educators and researchers might leverage nature-centric and place-based practices within their practice and methodologies in order to explore the relationship between trees, wheat fields, birds and other symbols and affective feelings of calm, peace, and joy. Moreover, educators and researchers may began to (re)value the appeal of agricultural-nature-forward practices and their ability to provide rural youth with a sense of belonging.

When considering the theme of pluralities of rurality, campers created and disrupted binaries of place. Some examples illustrated how the campers had already begun creating a rural/urban binary (e.g., modern cities/peaceful place, Dollar General/the mall); however, rurality operated as a space of joy and comfort. The plurality of rural identities was further explored in spaces of "here/there" (e.g., mountains/beaches, US/Korea). These examples provided an important inquiry of what and/or who gets celebrated in rural spaces. For instance, in what ways are rural people considered well-traveled or how are adoptive relationships uplifted in rural communities? This leads to a potential question of how people negate their place identities while internalizing metronormativity and deficit stereotypes of rural spaces. This may reproduce ideals in which rurality is not considered to be modern, progressive values get aligned to urban spaces, and rurality is associated with whiteness and singular religious experiences (Christianity). Moreover, this thematic finding also exposes the temporal flux of place identities; If I grew up in a rural space, then leave, will I become too urbanized for my rural community? This is important when considering rural salience in identity development even in urban educational studies because humans may not want to feel like they are ever 'away' from their community (Biddle et al., 2019). A traveling girl may also want their wind in their hair on the back of a horse while not feeling like the two are mutually exclusive.

Lastly, campers generated numerous allusions to rurality (e.g., place anchors) in their writing while also exposing rural literacies of place. Examples of the stories of place and rural literacies can be found in the famous sausage balls, old man Joe, and a home economics educator who is the community's best sewing teacher. These narratives of place cultivate rural literacies; they demonstrated that stories from rural spaces are worth reading, writing, and uplifting while also exhuming the cultural wealth in rural communities (e.g., old man Joe's store is the important

store in town). This cultural wealth not only celebrated the local recipes, humans, and businesses, but it also generated a positive affective connection to place. Campers did articulate a development of belief systems, in particular with religion, by noting their “Bible in hand” and being a “good Christian.” Religious influence for these youth from small communities seemed to help shape their place identities; however, it also presented a narrow view of a singular religious experience being the norm (e.g., Christianity was the only religion mentioned). When place identities are connected to discourse communities that may have more belief systems in place, individuals have the potential to tack on various discourse community belief systems to their rural identity. For example, a rural Christian may quickly note their religious upbringing and belief systems when asked to describe their sense of place and identity, and in turn rurality may become co-associated with a Christian belief system. Azano (2011) also found faith to be a salient theme in her study by noting, “For example, a cultural norm identified throughout the learning experience was faith and, on more than one occasion, Mr. Schaffer expressed his personal bias for Christian values and for attending church” (p. 9). This echoes issues with stereotype threats in rural communities and the value of disrupting monolithic narratives of rural individuals. Perhaps Bishop’s (1990) mirrors, windows and sliding glass doors illuminates the role of allusions when considering how place and identity interact with discourse communities. Within this framing, my rurality was validated in the place stories of sausage ball recipes, grandmas’ who were teachers, and even a Bible that was handed down to me by my grandfather. However, again, place matters; my rurality is shared with many of these campers. Therefore, we must be critical when considering how social identifiers and symbols of place get used to articulate rural identities.

The artifacts explored in this study emphasized the critical importance of considering how a place-based pedagogy may work in conversation with internalizations and externalizations of place in order to inform a sense of belonging with rurality and identity. Laing and Moules (2016), in their study on the importance of cancer camps, concluded by arguing, “Its empty space becomes killed with words, stories, emotion, laughter and play, kinship, fit, and community, and often, pain and suffering can be left there, to echo through the trees” (p. 42). The emotions, stories, kinships, and sense of play were captured in images of ecological cosmopolitanism. These rural campers consistently emphasized the role of emotions, stories, kinships, nature, and human multitudes to articulate their sense of place identity. When allowed to wildly celebrate place and selfhood, stories of place (e.g., old man Joe and grandma being the town’s home economics teacher), emotions (e.g., calmness, peace, and happiness), and nature became centric to these campers’ rural identities.

Part of this research set out to address the unique implication for place-based pedagogies in the context of rural gifted youth by addressing an opportunity gap presented to rural, gifted learners. By curating a place where rural, gifted learners felt like both their identity and sense of place were celebrated and valued in the humanities, campers got to see that they and their places matter. Places that once felt like they were “nowhere special,” were now the (re)imagined spaces where poets, ecologists, researchers, farmers, and teachers were equally valued for their knowledge and crafts. Simeonoff Sr. and colleagues (2024) noted, when reflecting on their Akhiok Kids camp for local Sugpiaq youth, “The story of Akhiok Kids Camp is an example of rural Indigenous education that fosters healing and cultural resurgence” (p. 57). While SEE College’s mission was not directly centered on legacies of colonialism, the mention of fostering healing and cultural resurgence is vital in better supporting rural gifted learners while also

revitalizing rural communities. Rural gifted kids are not simply going to "be okay" because they are advanced, a common myth (National Association for Gifted Children, n.d.); they need moments to connect with other rural gifted youth and opportunities to find value in and/or uplift their place communities. SEE College has the possibility, based on the artifacts, to support rural communities by rewriting harmful narratives through younger rural voices.

Limitations

Like any research project, this study has limitations. First, as mentioned in my positionality statement, I was an active researcher participant. I was present to help with the academic planning, overall flow of the camp activities, and was even driving campers in the vans. This may have limited my opportunities to observe and collect data during certain curricular activities when I was engaging in an administrative task. However, my involvement also allowed the campers to connect with me and not view me as a random observer. My involvement allowed for me to understand how each lesson and prompt was designed with place in mind. Moreover, this is a camp that engages with academic content but emphasizes that we do not want campers to feel like they are at school; therefore, some of the students' artifacts may have been rushed and poems unfinished. Some may also consider that since this camp was for gifted students that it may limit the scope of the research questions. Yet, the strength of this sample is that participants chose to be there, in some capacity, and elected to engage in these academic courses. Lastly, to help with not generating further monolithic notions of rural, rurality at this camp was deeply engaged in the rural, central Appalachian region where most of our campers and instructors called home.

Conclusion

During a residential summer enrichment experience for gifted rural middle schoolers that utilized a place-based pedagogy, campers wrote, drew, and created artifacts that illustrated their relationship with ecological cosmopolitanism, illuminated the concept of place plurality that engages with a here/there notion, and emphasized rural literacies through discourse communities and place anchors. These artifacts exposed the role of how place and identity get co-constructed both internally and externally while also presenting the viability and vibrancy of rural communities. For future practices, educators and researchers may consider how to leverage place-based pedagogies and methodologies in rural communities to uplift the multitude of intersecting rural identities while engaging in discourse communities centered on rural literacies. Moreover, allowing rural youth to write about their sense of place works to disrupt the monolithic narratives which have created stereotype threats about rural communities. By creating moments where rural youth get to explicitly talk about place and showcase their place identity, rural youth foster their own sense of belonging while deeply engaging in their communities. It can allow rural youth to critically consider who and what influences notions of rurality while also providing moments to advocate for their own identities regardless of the monolithic images and stereotype threats. And it can begin (re)rooting rural youth to care and find joy in their own places. Instead of writing a poem, rural youth can be poets who rewrite the deficit images of rurality while critically engaging within their own communities' histories, politics, and beliefs.

SEE College, similar to cancer camp described by Laing and Moules (2016), allowed campers to scream with passion their deep relationships of place and identity to an entire land-grant university. I wonder if campers, while on a distant-from-home campus, saw the open fields, cows, mini-donkey, chickens, and fewer than normal trees, as familiar. Perhaps then, grounding critical pedagogy of place and practice in contexts of rurality may allow students to (re)connect

with those moments of peace, calmness, and adventure. It is worth noting that, for some historically marginalized and vulnerable rural communities, this sense of calmness is impacted when learning more and engaging more with place histories. Nevertheless, rural youth must be given opportunities in which they can celebrate their own identities and sense of place to disrupt, regenerate, and uplift narratives of rurality. Spaces for rural vibrancy that uplift the vastness and wealth of rural communities, people, and skills must exist for rural communities and youth to fully thrive and exist.

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Appendix A

Exemplar Artifacts from SEE College Summer 2022 and 2023

Student	Pronouns	Rural Code	Written Artifacts (Journal Entries, Poetry, and Artifact Captions)
#1	She/her	RR	My hometown Wildlife and plants are everything in my rural community There are lots of birds and diverse animal populations Sports are very important especially football Like in most small towns food is a very important part of everything and every family has its own special celebration food(s) like my gramma who makes amazing sausage balls at Christmas lots of people sew in my town of [Location] but my Granny is the best of them all and was a home ec. Teacher lots of people in [Location] fish including my Dad and I in our pond but I've never met a more enthusiastic fisher than my little brother lots of people grow food and/or own farms particular one family who lease my grandmas land-The Matthews (psd)" [poster presentation]
#2	He/him	CS	I am from rice cookers from rice and soy sauce I am from the paint smelling walls (yellow, dull) it feels like cold and bumpy cardboard I am from the ground hog holes the deep ones the roots sticking out like my toes [Journal entry]
#3	He/him	RD	I am from fishing rods I am from burgers and steak I am from biscuits and eggs These are the things I am made of [Journal entry]
#4	She/her	RR	I am from [Location] I have lived there for about 6 to 7 years basically my whole life. It's home. If you are wondering, why exactly are South Korea and China on my project, here's my answer. I have two places that I call home. [Location] county, where I live eat, breathe, etc, and my grandparents' apartments in Incheon, South Korea. [Location] county is my actual home, South Korea my extended home. China is on my project because my friend [Name] is from China. We decided to collaborate together. My home(s) have shaped me. Because of these two homes, I can speak two languages, my project shows the two places I call home. With my project I tell my store. [Poster Presentation]
#5	She/her	RF	I am from Nanning, China. I was adopted before I turned 2. To me home is a special place where I can have fun and be myself.

			My home has shaped me to the person I am through love, care, and friends. My project represents where I came from and where I am now. The cherry walk way is a photo my parents took when they were in China and the drawing of the house is where i am. [Poster presentation]
#6	He/him	RD	I'm from [location]. In my opinion home is where your family is at. Since I live on a farm, I can drive tractors. My project shows a field because there are so many in [location]. My painting is a story of a wheat field happily growing. [painting with caption]
#7	He/him	TD	I'm from the small town of [location]. My home means peace. It has shaped me to be calm and happy. I wrote and painted to show these traits. I'm trying to portray these characteristics in my project. Being rural is important to me so I tried to make my project show that. [painting with caption]
#8	She/her	TD	I am from country music baked potatoes and tomatoes I am from riding my horse I am from getting home late from softball games and playing with my dog in the yard and having the best family ever that is where I'm from. I am from cowboy boots and blue jeans [Journal entry]
#9	She/her	RD	I am from a rural area from frolicking in tall grasses. I am from church down the road. I am from tall trees and long country roads the plain, you could call it who's grasses die from the sun's heat as if they were afraid. I 'm from corn and straw hats, from dirt roads and music I'm from the brains and the good lookers from don't look so sad and cheer up dude! I'm from a Christian family with a Bible in hand and so much I still don't know. I'm from Subway and McDonalds french friends and great coffee From the death of my great grandfather who fought for our country..[Journal entry]
#10	She/her	RD	I am from Rocky Roads from family game nights I am from trees everywhere (Green, fresh smells like heaven)

			I am from Oak trees, the forest Whose grass is green and tall I am from playing softball anywhere I could from wishing for White Christmas to having 60 degree summers I am from [location] this is where I'm from. [Journal entry]
#11	He/him	RD	I'm from nowhere special. from trees to grass [Journal entry]
#12	She/her	N/A-private rural	I am from the countryside horseback riding and all I am from the summer sun and the breeze of the fall But that's not the only side of me No, I have two I have the countryside of me and I also travel the blue I have a mountain part of me and the beach part is so much fun A forest part of me and a heart for the tropic sun So not only am I a country girl who likes the wind in my hair I am also a travel girl whose heart is everywhere I am from [location] but my family travels so much I don't consider myself from one place. I have experienced so many cultures that shaped me into the person I am today. This project is a way of me saying come into my world for a bit [poem + poster presentation]
#13	He/him	RD	I am from [location]. What my town means to me is redneck central. I was shaped to enjoy the space. My project says county fair and butchers. I am telling a story of how the people in my town make money
#14	She/her	RD	Dollar General is the mall. The. End. It LOOKs just like the mall; has everything the mall has, and as a plus, it allows animals! Better than the mall. I am from [location]. It is shaped with unwritten rules as are in this book. I feel like I'm tellin' the story of my town with this book because it has 'rules' that people in my town …. to me, home means a place where you are safe., [Part of a book of etiquette project]

#15	She/her	RR	I live on a little back road around a cemetery and next to a wheat field. This makes me feel adventurous and happy. I feel that with all of these different landscapes that I get to spend more time with my brother. My project shows a wheat field with animals playing sports and I play sports too [Poster with caption]
#16	He/him	RD	I'm from a small town named [location] 30 minutes north of [location]. To me, home is a quiet place you're familiar with. Because of where I live and what home means to me I like quiet life and don't like ___people. My project is about a quiet, slow Main street." [Original music composition called "Slow Road" preformed on clarinet with caption]
#17	She/her	RD	There is grass up to your knees… and you can always take a walk in the trees! There is so much fun to be had… even if there is no sand [poster with poem]
#18	She/her	RF	I am from the abandoned houses to the cornfield. I am from my brother's annoying voice to my dog's bark. I am from the peaceful trees to the grass in my backyard. I am from my friends houses to the lake near my house. [poster with poem]
#19	He/him	RR	I am from [location] and my home means happiness to me. My home has shaped me into a good Christian and fisherman." My project shows that because of the river in the painting. [painting and caption]
#20	He/him	RD	I am from the loans of alone quiet from the hid of the city but in the bamboo of Virginia Not modern cities am I from, but a peaceful place. I am from where internet isn't developed where deer have little space. [journal entry]
#21	She/her	TD	"[location] smallest town of all but sometimes I wish I was away from all the fog, away and away from all the time but the time is all gone and where the town is up on a hill feel or hear up on that hill is a store where old man Joe runs that store

			it one of an important store" [journal entry]
#22	He/him	RD	whenever I think of my home I think of the rednecks and trees but it is easier to make a tree out of pipe cleaners than to make rednecks [art sculpture and caption]

Appendix B

National Center for Educational Statistics NCES Locale Codes

City	Large	"Territory inside an urbanized area and inside a principal city with population of 250,000 or more."
	Midsize	"Territory inside an urbanized area and inside a principal city with population less than 250,000 and greater than or equal to 100,000."
	Small	"Territory inside an urbanized area and inside a principal city with population less than 100,000."
Suburban	Large	"Territory outside a Principal City and inside an Urbanized Area with population of 250,000 or more."
	Midsize	"Territory outside a Principal City and inside an Urbanized Area with population less than 250,000 and greater than or equal to 100,000."
	Small	"Territory outside a Principal City and inside an Urbanized Area with population less than 100,000."
Town	Fringe	"Territory inside an Urban Cluster that is less than or equal to 10 miles from an Urbanized Area."
	Distant	"Territory inside an Urban Cluster that is more than 10 miles and less than or equal to 35 miles from an Urbanized Area."
	Remote	"Territory inside an Urban Cluster that is more than 35 miles from an Urbanized Area."
Rural	Fringe	"Census-defined rural territory that is less than or equal to 5 miles from an Urbanized Area, as well as rural territory that is less than or equal to 2.5 miles from an Urban Cluster."
	Distant	"Census-defined rural territory that is more than 5 miles but less than or equal to 25 miles from an Urbanized Area, as well as rural territory that is more than 2.5 miles but less than or equal to 10 miles from an Urban Cluster."
	Remote	"Census-defined rural territory that is more than 25 miles from an Urbanized Area and also more than 10 miles from an Urban Cluster."

Overarching Binding Conclusions

While each of these manuscripts stands, each a different vegetable, rich in its nutrition in the same garden bed, there are themes that entwine them together—under the soil the roots are deeply networked and connected. Here I provide a discussion of the findings and questions that emerge from these intertwined manuscripts (see Table 1).

Table 1

Summary of the thematic findings from each manuscript

Manuscript	Thematic Finding or Emerging Questions
"Exploring the Role of Visibility in Rural Queer Narratives"	*Preserving Comfort:* Comfort and discomfort were central to rural Queer narratives. Some found themselves not wanting to "rock the boat" while others found peace in the land.
	Production of Spaces: Creating spaces of community that exist between the binaries of invisible and visible.
	Identity Work in Rural Queerness: Rural and Queerness operate in states of flux and are influenced by other intersecting identities and histories of erasure.
	Fear and Spaces of Violence: regardless of the levels of visibility, fears of violence are still part of a rural Queer existence.
"Queerness in Rural Schools: A Literature Review Exploring the Intersections of Rurality and Queerness in K-12 Schools"	*Evidence of Victimization and Safety Challenges for Queer Rural Youth:* as compared to urban schools, rural Queer youth faced higher rates of physical and verbal victimization.
	Attitudes of Educators Prevalent in the Research about Queerness in Rural Schools: research that explored the intersection of rurality and Queerness highlighted how educators (teachers, principals, nurses) felt about Queerness in school climates which included fears of backlash and ideals of conformity.
	Rural School Resources and Queer Identity: Rural schools, as compared to urban, had fewer Queer-affirming resources and polices.
"Anti-Queer Policy & Rural Schools: A Framework to Analyze Anti-Queer Policy Implementation in Rural Schools"	*"Does the Policy Make Assumptions on One Type of Parent?"* (p. 74) *"*Are all parents' values considered?" (p. 75)
	"How Does the Policy Define Gender and Sexual Identities?" (p. 74). Vague polices create a culture of confusion; therefore, language must be clearly defined by those that the policy influences. "Who are the policymakers proposing these policies" (p. 75). What trainings are available that are regionally specific?
	"Will the Policy Erase Rural Queer Educators and Students?" (p. 75). "Will the policy make it harder for Queer kids and educators to simply exist?" (p. 75)

"Cultivating a Sense of Place and Identity: Exploring Rural Identity through a Place-Based Summer Enrichment Program for Rural Gifted Learners"	*Rural Identity Expressed as Ecological Cosmopolitanism:* rural, gifted campers' written and artistic artifacts were deeply engaged with nature-centric imagery.
	Campers Explore Rural Plurality: Foraging through the Here and There- Campers created and challenged dichotomies of place while also disrupting rural monolithic narratives.
	Allusions Illustrate Rural Literacies and Anchors of Place: Throughout the artifacts, campers emphasized stories of place, symbols of discourse communities, and reflected on affective feeling about their sense of place.

Overarching themes include: (a) internalizations and externalizations of rural identity development through visibility, policy, and access to opportunity; (b) challenges and hopes for the value of rural diverse representation to resist rural, monolithic narratives; and (c) the influences of policy and place norms in rural schools and communities that influence authentic learning that centers place and self. These themes illuminate the value in closing opportunity gaps for rural learners and educators, especially who identify as Queer.

By exploring rural identities, especially vulnerable ones (e.g., Queer), educators, stakeholders, and community members can work towards providing more critically affirming pedagogies (e.g., a Queer-affirming place-base pedagogy), addressing identity erasure in rural curricula (e.g., stories of rural Queer people being alive and thriving), and co-generating, in connection with rural schools and communities, a variety of enrichment opportunities to address opportunity gaps for rural learners (e.g., rural Queer youth need more moments when they do not feel the pressures of state, federal, and local educational policies influence their ability to exist authentically in schools). These manuscripts advance rural education scholarship by simultaneously exploring two underexplored fields in rural education: rural Queerness in education and alternative enrichment experiences that address opportunity gaps for gifted learners. If educational policies that work to erase historically marginalized voices (e.g., anti-Queer policies) and recycle cis-heteronormativity continue to spread across the nation,

alternative enrichment experiences may be the needed bridge to close those opportunity gaps; these enrichment experiences may be places to (re)fill communities with diverse narratives and voices. In return, rural communities and schools will be (re)rooted as spaces of love, acceptance, and care with dreams of sustaining rural communities.

How to clean behind the ears

grandma Frances use to tell me every day
wash your face and scrub behind the ears

after a morning of pickin' tobacco
she even had special soap to remove the sticky sap

when college told me I was 'g' droppin'
and using diphthongs to pronounce "ice" and "bike"
I covered my accent in the same soap
to cleanse a dialect, I never knew I had.

Walmart parking lots, four-wheeler rides, and pastures
started feeling dirty
when learning about classic literature

wash the ruralness
scrub behind the ears

keep fingernail polisher remover nearby
men don't paint their fingernails at family luncheons
only pack solid colored tee shirts
no rainbows, no justice

I have six minutes to blast Nicki, Cardi B, and Beyonce
mentally shakin' my ass in the car
before I see the first tree on Whitten farm.

wash the Queerness,
scrub behind the ears.

I washed and scrubbed
thinking my rural and Queer identities
could be absorbed into a sponge
temporarily washed away
to feel like society's version of
dirt-free

(10/3/2023)

Disrupting identity erasure in rural spaces is about (re)practicing love, challenging monolithic narratives, and celebrating pride in both our authentic selves and our places. It is critical that rural schools, as spaces that are often one of the few spaces where rural youth get to co-inhabit due to geographic challenges, consider which rural people get to belong and feel represented and safe. Queer youth and educators may struggle building meaningful rapport and feeling a sense of belonging if policies and school climate keep devaluing rural historically marginalized identities and pushing them back into the closet. These manuscripts work collectivity to disrupt those monolithic rural narratives, critique assumptions created by vague educational policies that influence Queer and rural identity development, and explore the relationship between access, visibility, and local norms influence on authentic learning moments that celebrate place and self together.

Getting rid of homesickness

I never got the chance to come out to my grandma Frances

as she'd say, God called her home
many years before I was ready

the morning after she passed,
my dad said she came to him in spirit
said she missed the apple of her eye,
me.

In middle school, I went to a Christian summer camp
and when I had a panic attack 'cause I missed home,
a letter from grandma was waiting to tell me,
on Sunday night they had mac and cheese,
she had to pick string beans alone,
my principal, her good friend, had some health concerns
and she had included some chewing gym
I had never felt homesick.

her doctor use to call me her best medicine

since I'd get her moving.
like the one time we played tether ball
and laughed when she said,
"Oooo that one got me in the boobs"

after she left and I was the last
to put the yellow boutonniere
on her casket,
I felt homesick again.

existing is hard without
feeling love.

when I came out,
the nausea gently sank back into the Earth.

I never got to come out to my grandma Frances
in person

but as the apple of her eye
and best medicine
she knows.
(10/23/2023)

This work and scholarship is rooted in love, care, and joy while acknowledging the history and resilience of rural people. My grandma inspires me as an educator, and now scholar, because she taught me the importance of community in education and the importance of love in teaching. She taught me the value of being authentically yourself when we learn and teach. Homesickness may be missing a place, a person, or even sometimes you miss yourself. Rural Queer youth can often feel homesick; they may miss their home that kicked them out, or they may hide their Queerness to feel comfort in a home, or perhaps they have not even found home within themselves.

Recently, I listened to Kentucky teacher of the year, Willie Carver, speak at the 2024 Appalachian Studies Conference. He mentioned two ideas that resonate within this collection of manuscripts: 1*) rural Queer kids may constantly feel like they are living in a world where their*

authentic selves are on trial; 2*) if, as adults, we do not feel like we belong in our jobs, we put in our two-week notice. Rural Queer kids never get a two-week notice; they must stay for 12 years, minimum, in a space they may not feel like they belong.* It reminded me of own learning journey in my rural school and what the possibilities could have been like if I had been able to be my authentic self in school. And with that comes hope. When exploring various Queer themes in the history of Appalachia literature, Carey (2024) concluded, "the attention to—and the respect afforded to—diverse voices within Appalachia appears to grow daily" (p. 197). Rural complexities matter, and spaces to allow for self and place to be co-created and equally, critically valued allows for survival.

I would have been the closeted, rural student who attended our summer camp and, instead of growing up resistant to my rural and Queer identities, I may have been given the opportunity to value my own authentic self while celebrating where I was from. While I have been writing this dissertation, Queer youth and educators, not just from rural spaces, have either been further pushed out of school or harmed in schools. This work must be taprooted in activism with a dream of Queer liberation that uplifts rural communities as spaces of love while also recognizing the importance of holding places we love accountable. I hope the findings and research presented create an urgency to combat anti-Queer policy and mindsets everywhere, especially in rural spaces, because youth should be able to thrive in any school while celebrating their existence—not fearing for it. When teachers and youth get to be their authentic selves and value their identities and places, love and care can (re)exist in classrooms.

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