CONCEPTIONS OF RURALITY: EXAMINING BELIEFS AND THEIR IMPACT ON TEACHER EFFICACY IN A SMALL APPALACHIAN SCHOOL

Lori Wickham

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CONCEPTIONS OF RURALITY:
EXAMINING BELIEFS AND THEIR IMPACT ON TEACHER EFFICACY IN A
SMALL APPALACHIAN SCHOOL

A Dissertation
Submitted to the School of Education

Duquesne University

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of Doctor of Education

By
Lori A. Wickham

August 2023
CONCEPTIONS OF RURALITY:
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ABSTRACT

CONCEPTIONS OF RURALITY:
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By
Lori A. Wickham
August 2023

Dissertation supervised by Dr. Rick McCown

The current literature documents the historical peripheralization of rural communities and the deficit narratives often imposed upon their schools, students and families. Research further suggests this history of peripheralization is often internalized by those identifying with these communities and that this internalization of deficit orientations may be impacting perceptions of possibility in educational practice. This mixed-methods study investigates more thoroughly if and how these core-periphery dynamics manifest in a small Appalachian school by examining possible connections between educators’ beliefs regarding rurality and their sense of teacher and collective efficacy. The research was guided by the following question:
How do rural teachers’ beliefs about their communities and their schools relate to perceptions of efficacy regarding instructional impact and student outcomes?
Utilizing efficacy data and interview and focus group data, examined through the lens of Peircean belief theory (Anderson, 2005; Cunningham, et al., 2005; Kaag, 2012; Schreiber & Moss, 2002) and Sen’s theory of adaptive preferences (Sen, 1999; Teschl & Comim, 2005; Watts, et al., 2008), the study considered both the formation of beliefs—specifically those situated within rural culture—and their impact on perceived agency. Findings suggest limiting beliefs about rural possibility, as well as rural students and families, negatively affect teachers’ perceptions of impact and their beliefs regarding long-term student outcomes. Data also suggest a disconnect between school and students’ lived experiences, raising important questions regarding language, schoolcentric systems, and the ways in which limiting beliefs are formed and perpetuated within rural schools. However, perceived strengths related to community suggest a potential lever for improvement through which educators might revise beliefs, foster connections between school and the rural experience, and increase perceptions of possibility.
DEDICATION

This paper is dedicated to all rural students who have ever felt limited by context, to those who have struggled to envision possibility or to believe in their in themselves or the value of their rural experience. You are not less—you are strong, capable, wonderful, and uniquely positioned for greatness. I hope you see your worth, the beauty of your communities, and the vast potential and possibility that lives inside you.

To those who serve rural students—may we too recognize the potential of our students and ourselves and continue to learn and grow and to cultivate dispositions of possibility.

And to my son, Kai. I hope that you too know your worth, recognize your wonderful, and pursue your greatness. You inspire me daily. I love you, appreciate you, and thank you for making me a better human.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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Thank you.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

| Abstract | iv |
| Dedication | vi |
| Acknowledgement | vii |
| List of Figures | xi |
| RATIONALE AND INTRODUCTION | 1 |
| A History as the American Other | 2 |
| A Personal Perspective | 4 |
| Local Context on the Problem | 6 |
| The Specific Problem of Practice Addressed by the Study | 7 |
| Purpose of the Study and Central Research Question | 9 |
| Significance of the Study | 11 |
| CHAPTER 2 | 13 |
| LITERATURE REVIEW | 13 |
| Rural Peripheralization | 13 |
| Rural Invisibility in Educational Policy and Research | 14 |
| Policies and Systems at Odds With Local Contexts | 16 |
| What About Rural Diversity? | 19 |
| Leveraging the Strengths of Rural Identity and Community | 22 |
| Theoretical Framework | 25 |
| Considering Beliefs | 25 |
| Beliefs and Adaptive Preferences | 29 |
| Preferences and Efficacy Perceptions | 30 |
| Freire and the Significance of Place | 32 |
| Theory as It Relates to Stakeholders | 35 |
| Theoretical Overview and Graphic Representation | 40 |
| CHAPTER 3 | 43 |
| Introduction | 43 |
| Purpose & Research Question | 43 |
Positionality Statement ........................................................................................................ 44
Participants .......................................................................................................................... 45
Research Design .................................................................................................................. 46
Instruments ............................................................................................................................ 48
  Teacher and Collective Efficacy Surveys ......................................................................... 48
  Semi-Structured Interview Protocol ............................................................................... 50
  Focus Group Protocol ...................................................................................................... 52
Data Analysis ....................................................................................................................... 53
Design Alignment ................................................................................................................ 55
CHAPTER FOUR ................................................................................................................... 56
Introduction ......................................................................................................................... 56
Efficacy Surveys .................................................................................................................. 56
  Teacher’s Sense of Teacher Efficacy Survey .................................................................. 57
  Collective Teacher Efficacy Scale ................................................................................... 59
  Analysis of Efficacy Data ................................................................................................. 61
Conceptions of Rurality: Interview & Focus Group Data .................................................... 65
  Setting & Interview Process ............................................................................................. 66
  Interview Data by Participant ............................................................................................ 67
    Betsy ................................................................................................................................. 68
    Kyla .................................................................................................................................. 71
    Robert ............................................................................................................................... 76
    Tia .................................................................................................................................... 81
    Shae ................................................................................................................................. 86
    Tom .................................................................................................................................. 92
  Identified Patterns Across Participants ............................................................................ 97
  Identified Patterns Across Questions ............................................................................. 112
  Identified Patterns Within the Focus Group .................................................................. 113
Emergent Themes .................................................................................................................. 117
  Theme 1- Community & Relationships ......................................................................... 119
  Subthemes Within Community ....................................................................................... 121
  Theme 2-- Peripheralization .............................................................................................. 126
  Theme 3-- Conceptions of Success ................................................................................. 133
## LIST OF FIGURES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Theoretical Framework Graphic Representation</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Design Alignment Tool</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Teachers’ Sense of Teacher Efficacy Survey (TSTES) Data by Participant</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>TSTES Data by Participant</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>TSTES Mean Rating by Domain</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Collective Teacher Efficacy Scale (CTES) Data by Participant</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>CTES Data by Participant</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>CTES Collective Data by Domain</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>TSTES Outlier Frequencies</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>CTES Outlier Frequencies</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Patterns Across Responses to Prompt 1</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Patterns Across Responses to Prompt 2</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Patterns Across Responses to Prompt 3</td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Patterns Across Responses to Prompt 4</td>
<td>104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Patterns Across Responses to Prompt 5</td>
<td>107</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Patterns Across Responses to Prompt 6</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Emergent Themes Concept Map</td>
<td>118</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Community/Relationships References</td>
<td>121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>Peripheralization References</td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>Outcome Attribution References</td>
<td>140</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>Familial Outcome Attribution</td>
<td>141</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 22- Bootstrapper References .................................................................145
Figure 23- Fatalism References .................................................................149
Figure 24- Efficacy Findings in Relation to Interview Data Conceptualized..........154
Figure 25- Theoretical Framework Revisited ..............................................172
Figure 26- Theory of Equitable Collaboration ..........................................190
Figure 27- Action Framework ..................................................................191
CHAPTER I

RATIONALE AND INTRODUCTION

Nearly 97% of United States land is classified as rural, and approximately 20% of the nation’s public school population identifies as rural (Ratcliffe, et al., 2016); yet much of the research on rurality and its challenges has been framed as peripheral to the concerns of broader society. Rural schools are often associated with a spectrum of educational challenges including high-dropout rates, limited resources, and academic underperformance (Anthony-Stephens & Langford, 2020; Vaughn & Saul, 2013), and while there have been reported gains in rural education, these gains have not kept pace with other areas of the country, as rural counties continue to account for approximately 80% of the 316 counties identified as having “low educational attainment” by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA, 2020). These trends are particularly visible in Appalachia and may reflect complex dynamics between established core-periphery relationships related to geography, economies, politics, and ways of life. Challenges in these communities, however, are often perceived as fringe issues rather than those of national or global importance, and consequently, the rural narrative has become one in which communities often perceive themselves as peripheral to or separate from broader society (Anthony-Stephens & Langford, 2020; Azano & Biddle, 2019).

Influenced by media depictions, prevailing stereotypes, and histories of deficit framing (Harris, 2022; Peine, et al., 2020, Stoll, 2017), for many living, working, and learning in rural communities, the rural narrative has come to reflect a sort of otherness apart from broader society, and the identities fostered by these narratives may influence how rural students, communities, and educators fair, as hegemony and peripheral
perception can shape how rural students and educators see themselves in relation to the educational aims and corresponding policies of broader society. Azano and Biddle (2019), for instance, found that within many rural schools, both students and educators often identified as outsiders lacking agency in relation to state and national standards, contributing to a culture in which achievement and learning targets are often seen as either unattainable or unnecessary. Such a culture, however, can further ingrain peripheral identities by reinforcing hegemonic narratives that undermine student potential by limiting perceptions of ability and potential (Azano & Stewart, 2016). In matters of equity work, this history of hegemony can create barriers for those advocating for change, making research in this area a significant matter of social justice.

**A History as the American Other**

In order to fully understand the concept of rural peripheralization, one must first understand the historical contexts that have shaped Appalachia, particularly as it relates to external forces arising from more geographic and social centers through which broader society has characterized and portrayed the region. As noted by Harris (2022), Appalachia “has undergone the economic forces of colonialism and industrializing capitalism” throughout our nation’s history, resulting in “cultural hegemony” that has contributed to national conceptions of Appalachia that often misrepresent the region and its inhabitants (p. 3). “From the Revolutionary American State’s invention of early white settlers as the virtuous yeoman of the Republic to the modern perception of Appalachia as backwards, conservative, and drug-addled,” wrote Harris, “shifting national economic conditions resulted in a constant invention of Appalachia in congruence” (p.3). These representations of Appalachia have often shaped not only national perceptions of the
region, but have, according some researchers, contributed to local identities and notions of self within the region (Harris, 2022; Peine, et al., 2020, Stoll, 2017). In a recent article, Peine, et al. (2020), noted the social and economic marginalization of the region and the power of “representations of Appalachia [that] are strategically deployed at particular historical moments,” pointing to the relatively recent negative depictions of rurality used by the media to substantiate notions about “Trump Country” as an example of one such moment (p. 41). Such depictions, be they contemporary or historical, have, according Peine, et al., reinforced “an oversimplified rural-urban dichotomy,” situating Appalachia as a sort of “internal other” and often serving as justification for ongoing exploitation and the challenges faced by Appalachians (p. 41).

This dichotomous depiction extends far back into the region’s history. Framing the early settlement of Appalachia as a form of internal colonialism in which Appalachian settlements were used to serve the interests of a distant ruling class and newly developing nation by way of both human capital and natural resources, Stoll (2017) noted the dispossession of Appalachia and the positioning of its inhabitants as others who reside outside the norms and culture of broader society as a recurring theme in American history. He argued that while the appropriation of its natural resources, first by wealthy landowners, then by industry, has been ongoing throughout our nation’s history, with each new wave of economic exploitation, Appalachia has been depicted as poor and degenerate or idyllic but archaic and that these depictions of Appalachia have worked to solidify its outsider status. This outsider narrative was echoed by Peine, et al. (2020), who further argued that these marginalizing perceptions have often served as a defense for ongoing exploitation “while also acting as a kind of strategic essentialism”
for those who call it home (p. 41). “This dichotomy,” stated Peine, et al., “echoes the tension in Appalachia as a signifier—on the one hand, of the pathological deviance that explains and justifies its poverty and underdevelopment and, on the other hand, of an iconic American independence, resilience, and anti-establishment sentiment” (p. 41).

**A Personal Perspective**

This research is of personal significance because not only am I an educator in rural Appalachia, I grew up there, and I am well acquainted with the power of hegemonic narratives on both a personal and professional level, as well as the challenges of rewriting those narratives. As a student graduating from high school, there were both subtle and overt messages that positioned my experience and thus myself as less than that of broader society. I was often encouraged to apply to small schools close to home, warned repeatedly that “big” schools typically sought applicants from elsewhere because students from those schools had more opportunities and were in turn better prepared, and cautioned about the world “out there.” These messages seemed to have a clear relationship to geographical place and prevalent conceptions of rurality, particularly as it relates to education and opportunity, and they had an undeniable impact on my perceptions of self and my perceptions of possibility as a young adult.

More than a decade later, when I returned to this region as an educator, I found myself further influenced by this narrative. I was susceptible to messages indicating that our schools were less, and the longer I worked there, the more I began to question my ability to work elsewhere. I once again was struggling with fears of being an imposter, fears of applying for positions in other areas or pursuing advancements because I doubted my experience was truly experience, and I realized that I had yet again internalized the
deficit narrative. I had fallen back into early formed beliefs about rurality and its alleged limitations. But even more concerning to me was the realization that these beliefs were transmittable to students. I did not see my students as less and certainly did not want them to see their options or abilities as limited as I did at their age, but these messages were pervasive. For instance, a veteran teacher once approached me to let me know that “none of these kids are going to work at NASA, and most will end up working at Convenient,” so I probably needed to “ease up” on my expectations. Another told me to “just see to it that they graduate; they’re heading to the mine anyway.” Although these messages are different in literal content to those I heard in my youth, they seemingly relate to the same outsider narrative in which rural students are different and due to their peripheral position, do and therefore, need less.

In the 12 years that I have taught rurally, the educational climate has changed drastically. The adoption of Common Core State Standards, increased accountability measures, and the expectation of data driven instruction have altered expectations from the top down, but extant data and observation suggested that messages being communicated regarding potential and possibility remain deficit oriented. For instance, a writing prompt I once gave to my high school English students that asked students about their aspirations after high school revealed a trend of students expressing they did not believe they had many options outside of local community colleges or directly entering the local workforce. One student wrote that she wasn’t going to apply to the college she had always wanted to attend because “I’m the top of the class here, but I’d probably be a C student at a real school,” a sentiment echoed in other responses. Responses to a prompt in which I deliberately attempted to get students to focus on strengths by asking them to
discuss the advantages of attending a small rural school suggested many students valued the community and friendship that a smaller environment provided, but the majority of these responses were qualified in a way that highlighted a prevailing deficit narrative in which their small school experience meant they were less prepared, less respected, and less capable than students elsewhere. There were even students who responded that there were no advantages to growing up rural. Again and again I have encountered students who seem to perceive themselves as less and somehow outside the possibilities and opportunities of broader society, an observation that has prompted me to question the formation of these beliefs, the messages contributing to them, what role we as educators—be it overtly or covertly, intentionally or unwittingly—play in reinforcing them, and how these variables impact educational outcomes.

**Local Context on the Problem**

As previously noted there are sharp disparities between educational outcomes in rural Appalachian communities and those in more urban and suburban areas. In West Virginia, for instance, where more than 60% of the population has been identified as rural, only 20% percent of the state’s residents over the age of 25 hold a bachelor’s degree (United States Census Bureau, 2020), and 13 counties have been identified as having low educational attainment (USDA, 2020). In Ohio, where rural districts comprise 37.5% of the state’s total districts, rural students lag 24% behind their suburban peers in post-secondary enrollment, and of those who do enroll, they are reportedly 18% behind suburban students in college completion within six years of high school graduation (Ohio Department of Education [ODE], 2020; Thomas B. Fordham Institute, 2020). Additionally, rural schools in both states report significantly lower overall standardized
test scores on both state and national assessments (Thomas B. Fordham Institute, 2020), with these data further linked to long-term outcomes such as earning potential, unemployment rates, and the sustainability of local economies, indicating a significant need in the region. Although there are undoubtedly a myriad of variables contributing to educational outcomes, it seems remiss to ignore the potential role of beliefs and narratives, such as those noted above.

**The Specific Problem of Practice Addressed by the Study**

Belkin High School is a department within a larger pre-K-12 facility that comprises the Belkin campus. The school is part a rural district that includes five elementary schools serving grades K-8; three high schools serving grades 9-12; and a career center serving grades 10-12. Although relatively small in population, with approximately 1,900 students between the nine schools, the district is geographically the largest in the state, covering more than 545 square miles. Situated on the West Virginia border, encompassing the riverfront and back hills areas of Monroe County in southeastern Ohio, the district as a whole is considered Appalachian, and the Belkin campus is one of the most geographically isolated within the district.

According to recent demographic data, the district’s student population is 47.9% female and 52.1% male; .7% Hispanic; 1% multiracial; and 97.9% White, with no reported English Language Learners (Ohio Department of Education [ODE], 2020). Approximately 55% of the district’s students have been identified as economically disadvantaged, 9% as homeless, and 21% as students with disabilities (ODE, 2020). There is, however, slight demographic variation between the various district campuses. Belkin High School, which serves 121 students—56 female (46.4%) and 65 male
(53.6%)—reports a student population that is 99.1% white. Fifty-six percent of students are identified as economically disadvantaged, 15.6% as homeless, and 22% as students with disabilities—all significantly higher than statewide averages (ODE, 2020).

Most students served by the school live in or around the community of Belkin, a village of 384 people with an average individual annual income of $18,816 a year and a median household income of approximately $32,000. The local economy is largely driven by the mining/extraction industry, with transportation, construction, and office and administrative support fields providing a bulk of the area’s employment opportunities (United States Department of Agriculture [USDA], 2020). According to the United States Census Bureau (2020), only 12.5% of local residents over the age of 25 possess a bachelor’s degree or higher, and the area is among those identified by the USDA (2020) as having “low educational attainment.”

An influx of oil and gas revenue in the region in recent years has enabled the district to increase instructional spending, with the district recently matching and then exceeding the state average for per pupil instructional expenditures (ODE, 2020). Most recent achievement data, however, show students performing well below the state average in most areas. Proficiency rates on state tests for mathematics courses ranged from 15 to 29% as compared to statewide rates of 35-50%; less than 50% of students scored proficient in English Language Arts as compared to a 68% percent statewide proficiency rate; 64.4% of students were identified as below proficient in overall achievement; and only 2.8% of tested students earned a remediation free score on all parts of the ACT (ODE, 2022). Although the school has seen some growth, proficiency rates among economically disadvantaged students and students with disabilities remain
below 10% (ODE, 2022). Given these ongoing challenges and the disparities that exist between achievement and outcomes for Belkin students and their counterparts elsewhere in the state, as well as disparities between student outcomes within the school, specifically for those identified as economically disadvantaged and students with disabilities, it is imperative that we work to identify and address inequities perpetuating these outcomes.

This study sought to explore if and how educators’ beliefs, particularly those related to conceptions of rurality and perceived efficacy, may be contributing to what McKenzie & Scheurich termed “equity traps” and, in turn, inequitable student outcomes at the school (p. 603). Describing these traps as “patterns of thinking and behavior that trap the possibilities for creating equitable schools” (p. 603), McKenzie & Scheurich (2004) argued that equity traps cannot be addressed without first bringing “the unconscious, the dysconscious, to a conscious level” (p. 604), a concept that is particularly relevant in a rural school such as Belkin, as much research suggests hegemonic narratives of rural peripheralism may be influencing beliefs about education for both rural teachers and their students (Azano & Biddle, 2019; Anthony-Stephens & Langford, 2020; LaValley, 2018).

**Purpose of the Study and Central Research Question**

If limiting beliefs are prevalent within a school or system, these perceptions can become the prevailing frame for action (or inaction) and, as Coburn (2006) demonstrated, serve as a means of both legitimizing deficit thinking and delegitimizing agency, as perceptions of a problem and the thinking behind these perceptions can prevent the recognition of certain variables and the consideration of certain solutions. Furthermore,
beliefs and the frames to which they contribute have the power to shift perceptions of responsibility away from the school, impeding the development of actionable solutions. As noted by McKenzie & Scheurich (2004) “if we hold the dysconscious perception that some children are at a deficit… are incapable of performing at high levels, we lower our expectations” (p. 603), and the potential byproducts of this process include lowered standards, less rigorous curriculum, and ultimately an altered sense of ability and competency. Therefore, identifying potentially detrimental beliefs and working towards reframing can provide a means to a shared vision and potential solutions within the school’s sphere of influence (Coburn, 2006).

Given these potential outcomes, this study examined the beliefs of rural educators and explored how these beliefs may be contributing to perceptions of efficacy and, in turn, practice. The study utilized purposeful sampling, specifically criterion sampling (Bogdan & Biklen, 2018; Palinkas, et al., 2015), to include educators who grew up in or near the Belkin community, graduated from the studied school district, and spent their adult lives living and teaching in the community. These home-grown teachers’ experiences are deeply rooted in local culture, and given their tenure in the school community, they were likely to serve as the clearest representation of dominant school values and prevailing beliefs, providing valuable insights for identifying patterns of thinking and framing that influence instructional practices in the school. The work was guided by the following research question:

How do rural teachers’ beliefs about their communities and their schools relate to perceptions of efficacy regarding instructional impact and student outcomes?
Significance of the Study

As described in the preceding section, the study sought to explore how educators’ beliefs, particularly those related to conceptions of rurality and perceived efficacy, may be contributing to “equity traps” (McKenzie & Scheurich, 2004, p. 603) and in turn, inequitable student outcomes. The study aimed to identify prevalent beliefs about rurality and rural education among the teaching staff, as well as analyze perceptions of both individual teacher efficacy and collective efficacy in order to explore the relationship between beliefs and adaptations and teachers’ perceptions of their ability to impact student learning. It is hoped that this examination will provide valuable insights for identifying patterns of thinking and framing that may be contributing to the school’s ongoing struggle to improve student achievement. This examination of the dominant narratives of rurality and how these narratives contribute to rural identities and educational experiences aims to improve students’ experiences and outcomes. Teachers and educational systems play an important role in the development and fixation of student beliefs. Tschannen-Moran, et al. (1998) stressed the positive correlation between teachers’ beliefs and those of their students, suggesting that a teacher’s sense of agency can promote student agency, while Azano and Biddle (2019) emphasized the role of educators and educational systems in reproducing and perpetuating unhelpful deficit narratives that become “the de facto theoretical lens” for the rural experience (p. 4). These narratives often position both educators and students as outsiders and promote what Freire (2009) termed the banking model of education, which can undermine student and community potential. By addressing teacher beliefs and the adaptive preferences they produce and providing opportunities for critical inquiry and reflection, however, we may
initiate the revision of limiting beliefs, grow both teacher and collective teacher efficacy, and begin to challenge the reproduction process with new counter-narratives that promote agency and ability and contribute to more equitable learning outcomes for all students.
CHAPTER 2
LITERATURE REVIEW

Rural Peripheralization

As noted in the preceding chapter, nearly half of rural students are living at or below the national poverty line, and the schools these students attend are often associated with spectrum of educational challenges including high-dropout rates, limited resources, and academic underperformance (Anthony-Stephens & Langford, 2020; Vaughn & Saul, 2013). Despite reported gains, challenges persist. Often perceived as idyllic, homogenous, and removed from the tensions of broader society, these settings and the challenges they experience do not always receive national or even local attention, or when attention is received, it is, as Peine, et al. (2020) noted, “strategically deployed” depictions of rurality that promote “an oversimplified rural-urban dichotomy,” situating Appalachia as a sort of “internal other” (p. 41). Yet, whether it is unemployment, the opioid crisis, environmental concerns, or the myriad other issues facing the nation, rural areas are impacted—and, in many cases, exploited by the larger society for their human, environmental, and political capital (Huffling, et al., 2017; Peine, et al., 2020). This positioning as other reflects complex core-periphery relationships that have rendered many rural communities outsiders who must answer to but are somehow separate from broader society (Anthony-Stephens & Langford, 2020; Azano & Biddle, 2019). While these dynamics affect many facets of rural life, the narratives they promote and the identities fostered by these narratives almost certainly influence how rural students and educators fair.
Dominant narratives have created a space for hegemonic power dynamics and peripheral identities reinforced both within the community and through the attitudes of broader society. These forces can work to protect traditionally dominant power interests by creating a culture in which issues affecting broader society may seem distant from the rural community regardless of their local relevance (Anthony-Stephens & Langford, 2020; Azano & Biddle, 2019; Moffa & McHenry-Sorber, 2018). In education this hegemony and peripheral perception can be further compounded by the ways many rural students and educators see themselves in relation to the educational aims and corresponding policies of broader society. Azano and Biddle (2019) found that within many rural schools, both students and educators often identify as outsiders passively interacting with global knowledge rather than as active participants in its creation and application—an approach that lacks agency and can further entrench rural communities in peripheral identities by contributing to hegemonic narratives that undermine student potential by limiting perceptions of ability and positioning these students and communities as beyond the scope of both policy and possibility (Azano & Stewart, 2016). In matters of equity work, this history of hegemony can create barriers for those advocating for change, making research in this area a significant matter of social justice.

**Rural Invisibility in Educational Policy and Research**

Perpetuating these perceptions of rural peripheralism is the lack of attention given to rural concerns in educational policy, as well as the research that often informs it. Research suggests educational policy has been largely urban focused (LaValley, 2018; Moffa & McHenry-Sorber, 2018). A recent report by the Center for Public Education claimed 57% of policy insiders identified rural education as low-priority to the U.S.
Department of Education and further asserted that an analysis of academic research found urban related work appeared 16 times more frequently than rural research in top education journals (Lavalley, 2018). The report noted that when rural issues are addressed, it is often “through the perspective and values of metropolitan academics and policymakers” (Lavalley, 2018, p. 23). The misrepresentation and at times invisibility of rurality in the broader spheres influencing local contexts is particularly problematic because it often contributes to policy that further reinforces perceptions of peripheralism and lack of agency.

One such example, as noted by Close, et al. (2018), was accountability policy. Despite purporting to promote equity by holding schools, teachers, and students accountable for meeting higher standards and closing achievement gaps—operating on the theory that with this increased accountability administrators would supervise better, “teachers would teach better, and as a result, students would learn and achieve more” (p. 7)—these initiatives were fraught with weaknesses. And while such policies did contribute to improvements in some areas, such as increased attention to equity and traditionally underserved populations, these policies also presented a host of challenges felt most acutely in rural schools, where such policies were shown to produce limited gains in student outcomes but contribute to a barrage of new difficulties, one of the most notable being teacher recruitment and retention. While many schools identified as “low performing” by standardized measures felt the strain of new accountability policies, policy implementation in rural schools was especially problematic. National and even state policy failed to consider rural contexts and the ways in which rural schools and their
students would be impacted by these changes. This, however, is a recurring theme in rural education.

Lack of rural awareness is evident in reform policy that promotes school choice and teacher accountability, as these measures lack rural feasibility, do little to improve rural schools, and in many cases compound existing challenges (Barrett, et al., 2015). Punitive measures, such as probationary status or teacher termination, in connection with accountability-based reforms, for instance, have shown limited improvement in student outcomes in rural schools, as they fail to provide opportunities for rural educators to stay and improve and often contribute to high teacher turnover. Furthermore, given that many rural districts predominantly attract a small number of “home-grown” educators, the hope that more qualified teachers will step in to replace those lost is rarely realized. As Barret, et al. (2015) argued, many policies are largely designed with an “absence of emphasis on rural locales” (p. 1) and can lead to a variety of outcomes ranging from poor student outcomes to dissatisfied teachers and stakeholders pursuing sanctions to a shortage of qualified educators. This is particularly true in Appalachia where many districts attract inexperienced educators who leave for other areas within the first few years of teaching (Azano & Stewart, 2016; Lavalley, 2018). The byproduct is, for many students, a revolving door of unseasoned teachers, long-term substitutes, and poor educational outcomes—or in other instances, demoralized “home-grown” educators frustrated by policy inadvertently perpetuating views of rural separateness.

**Policies and Systems at Odds With Local Contexts**

Further compounding these tensions between core and periphery is that even when rural locales are able to successfully implement policy, there is still in many cases a
reinforcement of peripheral identities because, as Biddle, et al. (2018) suggest, there remains a “conflict between local contexts and schools’ institutional objectives” because state and national policy “often do not emphasize local responsivity or consider community development as a measure of success” (Biddle, et al., 2018, p. 2). In rural contexts, there is often greater interdependency between schools and communities, so tensions between local and institutional objectives can be experienced more acutely (Biddle, et al., 2018; Moffa & McHenry-Sorber, 2018). Adherence to policy and pressure to meet performance standards can, when emphasized as the sole objective, contribute to a failure to recognize schools “as part of a larger community ecology with an obligation to the wellbeing of both community and school” (Biddle, et al., 2018, p. 3). This absence of community orientation can further solidify perceptions of peripheralization and disconnect from broader society, since in many cases institutional aims seem counter to community concerns and may exacerbate local challenges. Schools are, as Biddle, et al. (2018) suggest, “local and national institutions in a global economic system that do not prioritize the sustainability or wellbeing of certain places” (p.17). They have complex relationships with their communities, but their positioning within these larger systems and the normative values they espouse can result in the perpetuation of “structural inequalities – including racism… or classism, in the case of low-income parents” (p.17). Despite well-meaning intentions, educators may find themselves “confronting the reality that they are preparing young people for work and lives that will not enhance their home community’s wellbeing” (Biddle, et al., 2018, p. 5).

This conflict is particularly evident when one considers schools’ contribution to out-migration from rural communities, as this outcome seems to emphasize a disconnect
between national and state policies and rural interests (Azano & Biddle, 2019; Biddle, et al., 2018; Moffa & McHenry-Sorber, 2018). Azano and Biddle (2019) asserted that the various social, political, and economic dichotomies presented in rural communities often create traps for rural educators, as standardized expectations for learning focus on the preparation of an urban workforce and are at odds with local economies and ways of living. Broader educational aims, thus, do little to sustain the local community because if educators do their jobs well according to the expectations of the established core-periphery dynamic, they are simultaneously harming the local community and economy, as the most accomplished students will leave the periphery to join the urban workforce. Furthermore, the researchers reported many rural leaders frame school around the lack of opportunities within the local community, creating a framework in which students often fail to see agency within their community or only see themselves viable actors upon leaving the community. Moffa & McHenry-Sorber (2018) presented similar findings in their research on Appalachian schools, asserting that traditional notions of planning for rurality have been complicated by contemporary economies and standardized approaches to education that place a premium on urban interests. They reported that prevailing conceptions of rurality often emphasize a lack of resources, opportunities, and agency and present a limited view of Appalachia that fails to acknowledge more nuanced cultural understandings that value the community-oriented strengths of the region, further asserting that this approach is contributing not only to out-migration but to the identities and perceived agency of those who remain in these communities.

Dominant community values often come to reflect this history of influence from outside power sources that have shaped local narratives and identities. Local spheres,
although outside the purview of many state and national policymakers, are influenced by the broader policy and the power wielded by those outside the community, and despite limited direct engagement with players in the state and national arena, those working within the local sphere are subject to this outsider influence on local systems. The involved power dynamics are complex and multidimensional and present differently within individual rural communities, but these dynamics tend to shape local perceptions of the system and perceptions of both community and self in relation to that system. As Marshall, et al. (2020) noted, when “policy processes are governed by the assumptions of elites” those outside this privileged group “will find it difficult, if not impossible, to have their voices heard” (p.100). Without voice, structural inequities will be reproduced and power will remain “near the power centers” (p.101), thus keeping some in the periphery.

**What About Rural Diversity?**

Rural peripheralization, however, is not limited to policy and politics. Academic work regarding diversity and culture also has been predominantly urban-centric. Despite the significant number of districts and students identified as rural, a perception of fringe status and homogeneity within rural populations persists, even within universities and teacher training programs, and as a result, there is often resistance to research and culturally responsive pedagogy in rural contexts (Anthony-Stephens & Langford, 2020). Eppley (2011) reported the standardization of educator training and its emphasis on ethnic and urban diversity has led to a pedagogy of erasure in which rural identities and diversity are largely ignored and rendered almost invisible in preservice programs. Similarly, in a more recent examination of pre-service programs, Moffa & McHenry-Sorber (2018) found rurality largely absent, as teacher preparation programs tended to be
tailored to the needs of urban or suburban schools, leaving many rural teachers
underprepared for rural challenges and for students who reflect “rural rather than urban
diversity” (p. 28). They further asserted that prevailing narratives of rurality and rural
education in both existing research and preservice programs further contribute this lack of
preparation as they tend emphasize depictions of poverty, isolation, and resistance to
change, and ultimately work to recreate and reinforce peripheral and deficit narratives
(Moffa & McHenry-Sorber, 2018).

One factor likely contributing to these dynamics is the long-held perception of
rural communities as largely homogenous with little variance in race, culture, values, or
educational priorities. In an examination of both students’ and educators’ perceptions of
rurality, Anthony-Stephens and Langford (2020) found that limited representation of the
diversity that actually exists in rural spaces has resulted in a perception of rurality as
homogenously White and Christian, with limited acknowledgement of more nuanced and
intersectional concepts of diversity—even amongst those who identify as rural. This
limited representation of rural diversity seems to contribute to a binary discourse model
positioning “diversity and rurality as nonoverlapping fields” (Anthony-Stephens &
Langford, 2020, p.333). They found perceptions of rurality were reportedly “pervasive”
among both university students and faculty (even those identifying as rural), forming “the
overt and covert subtexts that minimize teacher attention to diversity preparation in
nonurban settings” (p. 333). “In the United States,” wrote Anthony-Stephens and
Langford (2020), “rurality has a racially coded meaning to imply White and
homogeneous” (p. 334). They further asserted that “dominant discourse models about
rurality avail narrow identities for students, teachers, and schools, rendering the
complexity of rural communities and school districts, as well as the considerable variation within them, invisible” (Anthony-Stephens & Langford, 2020, p. 340). According to Eppley (2011), these trends in the depictions and treatment of rurality—trends that permeate policy, research, and preparation—have rendered rural peripheralization a “rigid truth” that shapes perceptions of rurality for both educators and the communities they serve (p.5).

Thus, it is in the disruption of core-periphery dichotomies and the reframing of rural experiences that social justice implications lie. As Azano and Biddle (2019) asserted, there is a need for resituating rurality within the broader, global context and promoting a more nuanced understanding of place through “counternarratives of hope that challenge the master modernist narratives of education presented by American policymakers” (p.6). This perhaps begins with addressing a current gap in research and increasing the visibility of equity issues in rural education. Research may counter a history of peripheralization that has placed rural education and communities outside broader contexts and has contributed to a loss of power and a decreased ability to identify as agents of change. By growing the body the research and working to equip equity-minded educators with increased resources for effecting change within rural communities, we may begin to alter these perceptions and contribute to the movement of rural communities towards more equitable and empowering outcomes. By examining communities’ unique local contexts and expanded notions of diversity, we may begin to counter historically inaccurate perceptions of rural homogeny and create a space in which educators and community members can begin to consider the interrelated dimensions of identity, diversity, and intersectionality and their impact on educational practice.
Leveraging the Strengths of Rural Identity and Community

This consideration of rural identities and the diversity of rural communities is imperative to centering rural strengths and countering a history of hegemonic narratives. Literature suggests that leveraging the strengths of local contexts hinges on tapping into the wisdom and wealth of local communities through more community-centered epistemologies (DeMatthews, 2018; Guajardo, et al., 2016; Khalifa, 2020). Misconceptions of rurality undoubtedly contribute to the educational milieu of rural school communities by way of both policy and pedagogy, and improvement efforts are not always holistic in their consideration of diverse student and community experiences, often neglecting the vast potential of community engagement. Creating a space for community and the lived experience of the students and families, however, may prove a powerful step towards more equitable outcomes, as this space facilitates a better understanding of the sociohistorical contexts shaping school-community dynamics, as well as opportunities for exploring identities, countering deficit-oriented, peripheral narratives, and building agency. This is particularly important in rural Appalachian communities, where external representations and a history of marginalization have shaped both national perceptions of the region and local identities and notions of self for those who live there (Harris, 2022; Peine, et al., 2020, Stoll, 2017). As Peine, et al. explained, historic dynamics have reinforced “an oversimplified” story of Appalachia that often underestimates those who inhabit the region, despite rich histories of resourcefulness and resilience (p. 41). Engaging purposefully with communities and reserves of local knowledge, however, may foster a means of expelling misconceptions and centering strengths.
Freire (2009), for instance, asserted that those who have been historically oppressed or marginalized must come to recognize their situations as circumstances “which they can transform” (p. 47). Freire’s proposed solution was a transformation of epistemologies to emphasize both love and agency, suggesting a critical problem-posing pedagogy grounded in dialogue as a means to liberation, and central to this work is community engagement. As Miller, et al. (2011) asserted, “…dialogue centers the contextual expertise of the people as active advocates for social transformation” and positions communities and the schools that serve them “to instigate authentic change directed at widespread humanization” because it emphasizes the “inherent capabilities of all people to name their realities and transform them” (Miller, et al., 2011, p.1083). Through problem-driven inquiry and dialogue—specifically inquiry and dialogue centered on place and the lived realities of the participants—all participants become “jointly responsible for a process in which all grow” (Freire, 2009, p. 80). It is in this joint responsibility that the power of community engagement lies because such approaches “value people and tend to identify and build the agency they bring with them” (Guajardo, et al., 2016, p. 5).

This work of identifying and building agency is key to improving outcomes in small, rural communities, because, as Guajardo, et al. (2016) described, communities often do “not see their story as a source of personal power as an asset…” and many do not “view their community as a unique and special place,” as they are “mired in a notion that they could not dream big” (p. 14). Although a sense of pride is common in rural communities, there is often an equally “palpable” sense of “low expectations” (p. 14). Community engagement that emphasizes narrative and dialogue, however, provides a means for
understanding stories and communities in “radically different ways” (p.15), ways that capture successes, strengths, cultural richness, and local assets and work to counter the dominant deficit narratives—a process the researchers identify as a “critical prerequisite to being to rehabilitate the collective self-esteem of many communities” (p. 57).

Community engaged leadership “recognizes and honors the work of elders and other who work to raise families, create enterprises, and lead institutions in the community” and “offers opportunities to engage organizations and communities in gaining a deeper understanding of the strengths” that exist in their communities (Guarjardo, et al., 2016, p. 57).

Furthermore, this process of sharing and engaging across traditional schoolcentric boundaries and the understandings gained from this process can open up new possibilities for both communities and the schools that serve them. As noted by Khalifa (2020), listening to community voices and experiences enables educators to “establish positive rapport and trusting relationships with communities,” as well as “overlapping spaces” (p. 192), which can serve to shift “historically school-based power to communities” (p. 49). This shift works to build a community and organization’s capacity for change, as well as educators’ capacity for more culturally responsive pedagogy. It can inform practice that is grounded in the lived experiences of our students, allowing educational communities to build “critical thinking, writing, and other communication skills through careful study of people, events, and significant entities located in the community” (Guajardo, et al., 2016, p. 17). By “liberating our schema from the traditional roles and responsibilities of unidirectional power” (Guajardo, et al., p.46), we are better positioned to both construct
and deconstruct narratives, rethink and reframe, and provide a path to identifying and building upon existing assets rather than focusing on deficits.

**Theoretical Framework**

Given the previously discussed history of peripheralization, the ways in which these histories have shaped rural narratives and identities, the relationship of these narratives to beliefs about rurality, and the potential power of these variables in educational contexts, this study sought to explore predominant beliefs about rurality within a small Appalachian school and how these beliefs correlate to perceptions of efficacy and possibility. The following section outlines the theoretical framework that informed the study.

**Considering Beliefs**

“Our beliefs guide our desires and shape our actions…. The feeling of believing is a more or less sure indication of there being established in our nature some habit which will determine our actions. Doubt never has such an effect” (Peirce, 1877, p.4).

A key variable in achieving this pedagogy of place is understanding the role of beliefs in the perpetuation of peripheral identities. Beliefs can shape how we see ourselves, see others, see ourselves in relationship to others and the world around us, our perceptions of possibility, and in turn, our actions. Although beliefs within all facets of the educational community are of significance, teachers serve as primary points of contact for students and families, as well as facilitators of student learning, and are of particular interest, since consciously or unconsciously, beliefs about rurality inevitably shape their work, by way of what DeMatthews (2018) described as “cultural baggage” (p. 128). Deliberate reflection and an authentic attempt to understand these beliefs and their influence at both
the individual and collective level are necessary for the development of more culturally responsive and relevant approaches in the classroom.

Of particular significance to understanding this “cultural baggage” is how these beliefs are formed. Peircean belief theory (1877) distinguishes belief from knowledge suggesting that while beliefs are often experienced as personal truth and asserted as fact, they are, as Kaag (2012) further explains, “not necessarily knowledge” (p. 515) but often “cultural or biological inheritance” (p. 516). Beliefs are shaped by experiences, however limited, as well as by others, and are often internalized as factual statements, as unquestionable truths, to which individuals cling fiercely. As Peirce explains, “it is the mere accident of their having been taught as they have, and of their having been surrounded with the manners and associations they have, that has caused them to believe as they do and not far differently” (p.8). This fixation of belief can occur in a variety of ways, but of particular relevance to conceptions of rurality and their transmission to students is what Peirce refers to as “tenacity.” Tenacity as a means of fixation suggests that belief is dictated by what is familiar and aligns with current thought and action (Anderson, 2005; Cunningham, 1998; Cunningham, Schreiber, & Moss, 2005; Kaag, 2012; Schreiber & Moss, 2002). The familiar is regarded as personal and cultural truth which serves as the frame for both action and aspiration. Thus, what is seen and heard and aligns with one’s experience thus far will shape conceptions of what is true regardless of their factual accuracy. In the case of rurality and rural students, if both media and community have familiarized deficit narratives and peripheral status, according to Peircean theory, these narratives could become fixed and regarded as truth—not just for students, but for educators and the communities they serve as well.
Peircean theory, however, also asserts that this fixation or internalization of beliefs can be further influenced by authority. Authority, as a method of fixation, relies on precedent, tradition, and a variety of cultural reinforcements with beliefs often instilled from early childhood (Anderson, 2005; Cunningham, 1998; Cunningham, Schreiber, & Moss, 2005; Kaag, 2012; Schreiber & Moss, 2002), but it also hinges on the transmission of ideas by those in positions of power. As Peirce (1877) noted, authority to some extent owes “its immeasurable mental and moral superiority” to the “method of tenacity,” as it tends to work in tandem with the tenacious beliefs of the individual, solidifying collective beliefs while allowing individual belief to remain “sensibly fixed” (p. 8). He points to the ways in which these methods of fixation have been utilized by various institutions and systems throughout history in order to govern beliefs, stating that, for better or worse, it “has over and over again worked the most majestic results” (p. 8). In regard to the internalization of beliefs, “for the mass of mankind, then,” wrote Peirce, “there is perhaps no better method than this” (p. 8). Although Peirce (1877) initially described fixation through authority within the context of more deliberate authoritarian control, if we broaden our understanding of authority to include not only traditional conceptions of power but also the power of policy, media, and popular thought, Peircean theory has important implications for understanding the formation and fixation of beliefs about rurality, as the narratives and depictions of rurality historically promoted by these sources could be contributing to belief fixation, especially if these conceptions of rurality are then reinforced by experience and perpetuated within local culture.

Furthermore, belief fixation provides a valuable lens for considering the role of educators in belief formation. Educators are authorized transmitters of information within
established social institutions. They are often perceived as experts or authorities, but they are not apart from Peirce’s masses, particularly in rural communities where the teachers who stay and wield the greatest influence are often those who were raised in the rural community in which they teach and live. These teachers have, as Peirce described, been surrounded by the manners, associations, and teachings of their rural communities, as well as the historical and popular depictions of rurality, which as Peine, et al. (2020) argued, have power both outside and inside rural communities.

“Narratives of dispossession, marginality, and pathology are powerful, both in how they shape outsiders’ views of the region and in terms of policy. However, these narratives can be internalized and can permeate the expectations and horizons of the possible in Appalachian communities” (Peine, et al., 2020, p. 49).

Viewed within the context of Peircean theory, these teachers may then represent both the product and the transmission of tenacity and authority fixation. They may provide valuable insights for understanding the development of limiting beliefs about rurality, as their beliefs and those they espouse in classroom contexts are often situated within long-standing historical narratives emphasizing poverty, loss, and a separateness from broader society, narratives that for many rural communities may have been internalized as the familiar and reinforced through existing systems of authority. These existing systems of authority are diverse, ranging from historical contexts and experiences that have shaped local culture and its intersections with national culture to policies impacting rural schools and communities at both the local and national level to media depictions of rurality that are seen both in and out of rural communities, but these systems may also be embodied in the curricula and pedagogy with which students interact. In this way, schools themselves
function as a system of authority and teachers are uniquely positioned within them. As individuals they are shaped by the processes of fixation, and as educators they contribute to these processes.

**Beliefs and Adaptive Preferences**

While this examination of belief formation is key, of equal significance is an examination of the ways in which these beliefs influence individual and collective adaptations, specifically adaptations in relation to perceived agency and possibility and, in turn, aspirations, and it is in this inquiry that I turn to Amartya Sen’s (1999) theory of adaptive preferences. Sen conceptualized development as freedom, noting that prerequisite to freedom is a sense of agency. Recognizing the role of culture, society, and external forces on individuals’ understanding of the world and their perceived relationship to it, Sen theorized that perceptions of agency were influenced by these understandings and that expectations of self and world were often modified to accommodate them. Writing on the role of such accommodations in marginalized groups, he defined adaptive preferences as the human tendency to adapt and in turn distort self-assessments and perceptions of well-being in response to circumstances of deprivation. As explained by Watts, et al. (2008), Sen’s conception of adaptive preferences highlights tendencies towards “self-abnegation” and a “renunciation” of “aspirations for a better life” through the internalization of external constraints (p. 1). The individual, thus, “acquiesces in her deprivation and may even come to value it” because the individual is unable to envision an alternative (p. 2). While Sen was interested in the problematic nature of such abnegation in individual assessments of well-being and ability, as Watts, et al. asserted, because of its close relationship to both well-being and aspirations and its
ability to reinforce or transform adaptive preferences, education proves “a particularly fertile field” in which to explore these concepts (p. 1).

This relevance is particularly true of rural education, where beliefs about rurality could potentially emphasize deficits, deprivation and perceptions of vulnerability to larger, economical and societal forces. Ideally rural education could function as a means of challenging limiting adaptations and raising aspirations, but as Azano and Biddle (2019) found, many rural educators frame school around the lack of opportunities within the local community and within this frame often fail to see their own agency, which may be contributing to what Teschl and Comim (2005) described as a tendency towards their own adaptive preferences and criteria that are “deformed” by negative beliefs and experiences (p. 229). If rural educators’ do, as Azano and Biddle suggested, identify as outsiders passively interacting with global knowledge rather than as active participants in its creation and application, Sen’s frame may provide a useful means of exploring the ways in which such beliefs contribute to both individual and collective adaptations related to the perceived utility of education, the identification of aspirations and aims, and expectations of instructional impact and ultimately student outcomes.

Preferences and Efficacy Perceptions

Closely related to these beliefs and adaptations is efficacy. Decades of educational research have suggested the significance of both individual teacher efficacy—teacher’s beliefs about their ability to perform at a given level of attainment and positively impact student learning and outcomes—and collective efficacy— the extent to which perceptions of collective ability to impact student outcomes are shared across teachers in a school building—to student achievement and overall outcomes (Donohoo, et al., 2018;
Donohoo, et al., 2020; Hattie, 2016; Tschannen-Moran, et al., 1998). Both are significant to this research as they provide a lens for examining the impact of beliefs on instructional practices, one that is closely connected to teacher performance and student outcomes. As explained by Tschannen-Moran, et al., self-efficacy influences “thought patterns and emotions that enable actions in which people expend substantial effort in pursuit of goals, persist in the face of adversity, rebound from temporary setbacks, and exercise some control over events that affect their lives” (p. 206). Teachers who believe that environment overwhelms their ability to impact to student outcomes may perceive significantly less efficacy than those who believe these outcomes are within their control (Tschannen-Moran, et al.). In this way, perceived efficacy may be influenced by, as well as be a potential influence on, fixated beliefs and adaptive preferences.

Because efficacy relates to perceptions rather than actual ability, the propensity for underestimation of actual capacities in educational contexts dominated by deficit narratives is of particular significance to the examination of beliefs regarding rural education as underestimation affects action and may influence how teachers perform in the classroom. Perceived efficacy, according to Tschannen-Moran, et al. (1998), “affects the effort they put into teaching, the goals they set, and their level of aspiration” (p. 216), an effect that seems closely related to Sen’s concept of adaptive preferences. This is of interest not just at the individual level, but at the collective level as well, as teachers’ beliefs about the ability of the school as a whole have been shown to be “greater than three times more powerful and predictive of student achievement than socioeconomic status” (Donohoo, et al., 2018 p. 41). Research suggests that when expectations for success are high, educators work with greater “persistence and strong resolve,” but when
educators’ perceptions are “filtered through the belief that there is very little they can do to influence student achievement, negative beliefs pervade the school culture” (p. 42), and, similar to the impact of adaptive preferences, beliefs regarding a lack of agency for both teachers and students can become “a solemn satisfaction with the status quo” in which “school communities experience an inclination to stop trying” (p. 42). Furthermore, low levels of collective efficacy have been also been connected to an increased tendency to shift responsibility for student outcomes to external forces, often creating what Donohoo, et al. described as “an “us” versus “them” mentality” (p. 42). This bifurcated perception in regard to educators’ sense of agency and efficacy may prove significant to understanding rural education since, as Azano and Biddle (2019) suggested, the “them” in rural schools is often the external forces of broader society.

**Freire and the Significance of Place**

These perceptions of external forces, according to Azano and Biddle (2019), are intensifies by what they described as paradoxes and false dichotomies presented in existing research that promote the deficit-based narrative that influences the ways in which rural students and educators perceive themselves and their relationship to global knowledge, thus impacting their perceptions of themselves as actors within the world. They theorized that these dichotomies contribute to a banking model of education that perpetuates rural students’ and educators’ peripheral positioning. The banking model, originally described by Freire (2009), may provide a means of better understanding the dynamic between teachers and students, but may also provide valuable insights for interpreting educators’ perceived relationship to standardized curricula and top-down policy, particularly for those educators who do not see themselves active agents within
broader society or those who have internalized peripheral identities or see rural education as situated outside this society. Freire’s theory of critical pedagogy, thus provides a useful lens for further understanding these dynamics and identifying a productive means forward.

In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2009), Freire asserted that those who have been historically oppressed or marginalized must come to recognize their situations “not as a closed world from which there is no exit, but as a limiting situation which they can transform” (p. 47). He further argued that that the oppressed “are not people living outside society” but rather "inside—inside the structure which made them "beings for others’”” (p. 74). Freire’s proposed solution was not to “integrate them into the structure of oppression” but rather to “transform that structure so that they can become beings for themselves” (p. 74), a point that speaks to the aforementioned discussions of beliefs, adaptation, and perceived agency. The banking model of education, however, hinges on the notion of integration, in which education becomes “an act of depositing” by “those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing,” and “the scope of action allowed…extends only as far as receiving, filing, and storing the deposits” (p. 72).

As Azano and Biddle (2019) noted, Freire’s framework may provide useful context for understanding the contextual tensions in rural schools and communities and a lens for considering the ways in which standardized global knowledge is delivered to educators, as well as to students by educators, both of whom may identify themselves as peripheral to this knowledge and as either passive distributors or receivers, creating a dichotomy between these human beings and the world and potentially leading to the internalization
of deficit narratives and of their role as spectators rather than powerful actors. Freire (2009) asserted, however, that a critical problem-posing pedagogy grounded in dialogue could provide a means of liberation, as it is through problem-driven inquiry and dialogue, specifically inquiry and dialogue centered on place and the lived realities of the participants, that all participants become “jointly responsible for a process in which all grow” (p. 80).

This process of inquiry and dialogue, which Freire described as a “process of becoming” (2009, p. 84), may serve as the framework for responding to belief-based challenges in rural education, as the process of inquiry and the internalization of perpetually becoming suggests a potential means of revising beliefs. To return to Peircean fixation, Peirce asserted that inquiry was central to the testing and revision of beliefs and advocated an ongoing examination grounded in a “dedication to the dialectic” (Peirce as cited in Kaag, 2012, p. 522). As Cunningham, et al. (2005) argued, “change of belief requires that we know what things are worth believing and what things need to be set aside” (p.187), and “fostering an increased comfort with doubt, abduction, and experimentation is paramount” (p. 188). Examining beliefs and instructional decisions in this light may provide a means of identifying their limiting impact on current classroom practices, while identifying ways to engage teachers and students in problem-based critical inquiry and ongoing dialogue may provide a path towards improving outcomes for rural educators and students. Critical dialogue that engages with the local culture, economy, and politics, may prove a means of countering dichotomies with “counternarratives of hope that challenge the master modernist narratives” and “disrupt the core-periphery dichotomy,” reframing the rural experience and situating it within the
broader, global context (Azano & Biddle, 2019, p.6). By engaging in critical pedagogy beliefs about rurality may be revised, adaptations altered, and efficacy improved. By embracing Freire’s ongoing “process of becoming,” this cycle of inquiry becomes recursive, allowing for continuous revision and refinement of both beliefs and outcomes, and as Cunningham, et al. assert, perhaps by fostering this disposition in teachers, they will be “more capable of fostering that same disposition in their students” (p.188).

Theory as It Relates to Stakeholders

Given these considerations and the research question central to this work, at the most immediate level, this study and its implications relate to teachers, specifically teachers at a small rural school in southeastern Ohio, as the study examined the beliefs of these rural educators and how these beliefs are contributing to perceptions of efficacy and instructional practice. The study explored how educators’ beliefs, particularly those related to conceptions of rurality and perceived efficacy, are contributing to “equity traps” (McKenzie & Scheurich, 2004, p. 603) and worked to identify prevalent beliefs about rurality and rural education among the teaching staff, many of which centered on perceptions of peripheralization and limited possibility. These beliefs were examined through the lens of Peirce’s fixation of belief and Sen’s theory of adaptive preferences. The study’s analysis of individual teacher efficacy, as well as collective efficacy, then explored the relationship between beliefs and adaptations and teachers’ perceptions of their ability to impact student learning, finding a correlation between beliefs about rural contexts and low expectations for impacting long-term student outcomes. The study, thus, suggests significant implications for teachers related to the identification and revision of
limiting beliefs, as well as the inextricable intertwining of language, beliefs, and educational practice.

Although teachers were the focus of this work, they are certainly not the only stakeholders. Administrators are also closely connected to this research. First, they are gatekeepers and collaborators in facilitating improvement processes, but more importantly, they are leaders within the school and, in some respects, the community and play a primary role in school systems and school culture, often contributing to the framing and language that surrounds educational practice and in turn contributing to both the development and reinforcement of dominant beliefs. Therefore, there is significant need for them to engage in the equity work surrounding this issue. Administration is often key to not only determining school initiatives, providing professional development opportunities, and implementing policy, but also to contributing to the narratives that surround these endeavors and can thus play an important role in the revision process. The insights gained from this research and their potential implications for practice may provide useful insights for administration in their efforts to support both teachers and students in cultivating more asset and possibility-driven frameworks. The findings related to teacher beliefs, individual and collective efficacy are of particular interest, as administrators have the ability to address challenges in these areas.

One area in which administrators are especially influential is collective efficacy. Donohoo, et al. (2020), cite school leadership, goal consensus, and cohesion among the primary contextual antecedents of collective teacher efficacy, suggesting that school administrators play an important role in developing agency dispositions. “The greatest power that principals have in schools,” writes Donohoo, et al. (2018), “is that they can
control the narrative of the school” (p. 44). Furthermore, this emphasis on collective
efficacy has been positively correlated to overall organizational health, resilience, and
decision-making, but of specific interest is the correlation between collective teacher
efficacy and teachers’ willingness to engage with new ideas and new methods to better
meet the needs of their students (Tschannen-Moran, et al., 1998). These findings suggest
administration will be essential in the improvement process, especially one that involves
engaging these teachers in reflective processes and cycles of inquiry designed to
challenge beliefs and foster culturally responsive dispositions. As Chandler (2014)
argued, district leaders have a responsibility to cooperate in examining the prevailing
“myths” that often inform practice and to provide educational opportunities to “both
future and current educators” that “challenge stereotypical beliefs” (p. 7).

Furthermore, the study’s findings related to the role of community and culture in rural
schools suggest school improvement—particularly that related to cultural histories, fixed
beliefs, and the development of a culturally responsive critical pedagogy of place—
cannot happen in a vacuum. The rural community should be part of the improvement
process, and initiatives should consider community stakeholders. Research suggests that
many rural communities and families perceive themselves as peripheral to educational
systems and often feel disconnected from school learning and school objectives—a point
later discussed in the findings of this study—so engaging the community is necessary if
we want to resituate learning within local contexts. This begins with increasing
communication with students and families, and an increasing emphasis on the importance
of family and what can be learned from them may prove a key component of the
improvement process (Foote, et al., 2013; Huffling, et al., 2017). As we begin to examine
how to best address beliefs about rurality, students and families should inform these discussions, as they can contribute to more nuanced understandings of culture, identity, and aspirations. Families and home cultures are key influencers in the formation and fixation of beliefs, and thus, should be considered when attending to beliefs within a school culture. Furthermore, families may offer valuable insights regarding the strengths of the rural community necessary for truly upending prevailing deficit narratives.

Additionally, local businesses, professionals, and community leaders should also be included since a critical and culturally responsive pedagogy of place demands an understanding of the various environmental, economic, and sociopolitical dynamics at work in a community, as well as active engagement with and in the local community (Huffling, et al., 2017; Lavalley, 2018). By consulting community members regarding the strengths and challenges of rural experience, as well as their perceptions of education and its relevance within the community, we can grow our understanding of rurality beyond prevalent stereotypes, while simultaneously empowering and giving voice to community stakeholders—thus, countering peripheral narratives and modeling the attention to place that we hope to cultivate educators and students.

The findings of this study may also prove relevant to local teacher training programs. Although the work of belief revision can certainly begin at the individual and school level, the development of more culturally responsive educators and more possibility-oriented educational dispositions within rural schools could be better supported through collaborative efforts between higher education institutions, preservice teachers, rural schools, rural scholars, and the communities themselves, as each plays an important role in shaping perspectives and experiences and consequently, the rural narrative. As our
understanding of rurality and rural education becomes more nuanced, these collaboratives could prove a means of cultivating more responsive dispositions toward rural communities prior to professional placement. Mills and Ballantyne (2010) argue that dispositions toward cultural responsivity and social justice are developed hierarchically, moving gradually from initial stages of self-examination to openness and eventually a commitment to social justice, but these dispositions are often not fully developed in preservice training. Collaborations designed to build on the understandings gained through this work, may provide a means of identifying and addressing gaps in the preparation of future educators for rural appointments. Furthermore, such collaborations will provide a more direct link between higher education and rural school communities and may foster a more robust examination of perceptions of rurality, as well as opportunities for challenging and dispelling the prevailing narratives.

Although educators and community members are vital to school improvement, the true beneficiaries and primary stakeholders of this research are the students. This examination of the dominant narratives of rurality and how these narratives contribute to rural identities and educational experiences aims to improve students’ experiences and outcomes. Teachers and educational systems play an important role in the development and fixation of student beliefs. Tschannen-Moran, et al. (1998) stressed the positive correlation between teachers’ beliefs and those of their students, suggesting that a teacher’s sense of agency can promote student agency, while Azano and Biddle (2019) emphasized the role of educators and educational systems in reproducing and perpetuating unhelpful deficit narratives that become “the de facto theoretical lens” for the rural experience (p. 4). These narratives can position both educators and students as
outsiders and promote what Freire (2009) termed the banking model of education, which can undermine student and community potential. By addressing teacher beliefs and the adaptive preferences they produce and providing opportunities for critical inquiry and reflection, however, we may be able to initiate the revision of limiting beliefs, grow both teacher and collective teacher efficacy, and begin to challenge the reproduction process with new counter-narratives that promote agency and ability and contribute to more equitable learning outcomes for all students.

**Theoretical Overview and Graphic Representation**

Figure 1, presented below, provides a graphic representation of the theoretical frame utilized in this study. Peircean belief theory (Anderson, 2005; Cunningham, et al., 2005; Kaag, 2012; Schreiber & Moss, 2002) and Sen’s theory of adaptive preferences (Sen, 1999; Teschl & Comim, 2005; Watts, et al., 2008) were employed in the analysis of interview and focus group data to identify and examine the prevalence of the both positive and negative beliefs regarding rurality and rural education, as well as identify and examine culturally reinforced belief-based adaptations. Teacher and collective efficacy theory informed the analysis of participants’ perceptions of efficacy in relation to the aforementioned beliefs and adaptations, the methodology for which is discussed in the next chapter. As depicted in the graphic representation below, the study was undergirded by the theory that, as Peirce suggested, beliefs are initially formed through both internal and external processes and that fixation or internalization of these beliefs can occur through tenacity within lived experience, as well as by what Peirce identified as authority. This cultural reinforcement is often carried out by those in positions of leadership or power who wield influence over one’s conceptions of the world around
them, arguably a position held by educators. Once fixated, these beliefs can become personal truths and thus, as Sen suggested, shape perceptions of possibility and in turn aspirations, ultimately becoming adaptations contributing to the ways in which an individual conceives of success. These conceptions then inform one’s perceptions of efficacy. Given Peirce’s emphasis on inquiry as a means of belief revision, the framework emphasizes Freirean (2009) concepts of critical dialogue and place-based pedagogy as a potential process toward the revision of limiting beliefs, as Freire’s grounding in inquiry that centers the community and lived experience of stakeholders may offer a powerful path toward improved outcomes.

These theories directly address the role of culture in the development of beliefs, as well as the ways in which beliefs about self and others in relation to cultural forces can contribute to interpretations of capability and in turn aspirations. As depicted below, the processes described are conceptualized as cyclical and ongoing with the potential for continuous refinement. This conceptualization of the relationships between beliefs, adaptations, efficacy, and inquiry informed this study and its design, as well as provided the lens for analyzing data and understanding and contextualizing both the formation of beliefs—particularly those situated within rural culture—and their potential impact on perceived agency.
Figure 1

*Theoretical Framework Graphic Representation*

Note. Figure 1 depicts the conceptualization of the cyclical interaction between beliefs, adaptive preferences and perceptions of efficacy, as well as the potential role of place-based critical inquiry as a means of ongoing belief revision.
CHAPTER 3

Introduction

Given the potential role of rural educators’ beliefs in the perpetuation of peripheral identities and deficit narratives, an investigation of teachers’ beliefs about rurality and their perceptions of ability and possibility in rural classrooms is of value, as rural educators may be unconsciously contributing to the disempowerment of rural students. As McKenzie & Scheurich (2004) argued, belief-based equity traps in educational contexts cannot be addressed without first bringing “the unconscious, the dysconscious, to a conscious level” (p. 604). Thus, the methodology that follows was utilized to examine the relationship between the beliefs of rural educators and their sense of efficacy in impacting student learning and outcomes. This section will first review the purpose and research questions guiding this study, as well as the researcher’s positionality in relation to this rural problem of practice. A description of the data collected, as well as the methods used for collecting and analyzing these data, will follow.

Purpose & Research Question

As noted in the preceding chapters, rural students, both nationally and locally, have been shown to lag behind suburban and urban peers both academically and in long-term outcomes. These disparities are particularly observable in rural Appalachia. Researchers such as Azano and Stewart (2016), Moffa and McHenry-Sorber (2018), Azano and Biddle (2019), and Anthony-Stephens & Langford (2020) have suggested a connection between beliefs about rurality and rural education—particularly those beliefs conceptualizing rurality and rural schools in relation to broader society—and student
outcomes, asserting an urgent need to address beliefs and perceptions in rural education. The aim of this study was to investigate this need as it pertains to a small, Appalachian school situated in a rural area in southeastern Ohio.

Peirce’s concept of belief fixation and Sen’s theory of adaptive preferences provided the framework for understanding and contextualizing both the formation of beliefs within rural culture and their potential impact on perceived agency, while efficacy theory served as a frame for considering how these forces intersect with perceptions of individual and collective ability to effect change. Through this amalgamative lens, the study examined the beliefs of rural educators and how these beliefs may be contributing to perceptions of efficacy and, in turn, practice. The work was guided by the following research question—how do rural teachers’ beliefs about their communities and their schools relate to perceptions of efficacy regarding instructional impact and student outcomes?

**Positionality Statement**

As noted in Chapter 1, this research is of personal significance because I am both an educator in rural Appalachia and a native of the area. I am well acquainted with the power of hegemonic narratives on both a personal and professional level, and my observations and experiences living and working in these contexts have seemed to suggest the prevalence of beliefs that rural students and communities are somehow outside the possibilities and opportunities of broader society and that inequities in academic achievement are thus a cultural inherency. It is these observations that have prompted me to question the formation of such beliefs, the messages contributing to them, what role we as educators play in reinforcing them, and how these variables impact
educational outcomes, and it is through this lens of personal familiarity that I explore these questions.

**Participants**

The study utilized purposeful sampling, specifically criterion sampling (Bogdan & Biklen, 2018; Palinkas, et al., 2015), to include six teachers from the Belkin School District. Purposive qualifications included having grown up in or near the studied community, having graduated from the studied school district, and having spent their adult lives living and teaching in the community. These home-grown teachers’ experiences are likely deeply rooted in local culture, and given their tenure in the school community, they serve as the clearest representation of dominant school values and prevailing beliefs, providing valuable insights for identifying patterns of thinking and framing that influence instructional practices in the school. Once potential participants were identified, they were informed of the study and asked to participate both in-person and by email. To protect anonymity, participants are referenced with pseudonyms in the sections that follow. Participants were as follows:

- **Betsy**- a 54-year-old female whose teaching experience is exclusively rural. While Betsy began her teaching career 12 years ago in a neighboring district with similar demographics to those at Belkin, she has been teaching English and history at Belkin for the last seven years.

- **Kyla**- a 28-year-old female who has been a math teacher at Belkin for six years. She is a graduate of the school district in which she currently teaches.
Robert- a 59-year-old male who was raised in the Belkin community, graduated from Belkin, and has been teaching at Belkin for 20 years. Although he currently teaches physical education and science, he has taught a variety of subjects during his tenure.

- Tia- a 31-year-old female who was raised in Belkin and graduated from the community high school. She has taught health, sports medicine, and related courses at the school for the last 8 years.

- Shae- a 43-year-old female, who grew up in Belkin and graduated from Belkin High School. She has worked at the school as a full-time intervention specialist for the last six years; however, she worked as an aid and substitute for several years prior to working in her current capacity.

- Tom- a 56-year-old male who grew up in the community, graduated from Belkin, and has been teaching there for more than 20 years. He has taught both English and history during his time at the school.

**Research Design**

At its core an examination of beliefs, the study began with a general review of the demographics of participating teachers to allow for a more thorough understanding of the human context of the study. This was followed by a mixed-methods approach to data collection.

The first phase of data collection included efficacy surveys in order to better understand “home-grown” teachers’ perceived sense of their ability to impact student learning, as a belief in one’s ability to influence and produce equitable outcomes is essential to actually producing them. To return to the assertions of McKenzie & Scheurich (2004), “dysconscious perceptions” of an inability to influence learning
produce patterns of thinking that “trap the possibilities for creating equitable schools” (p. 603). Thus, perceived efficacy data provided a starting point for identifying beliefs that limit student outcomes. For this analysis, quantitative data were collected on perceptions of both individual and collective potential for impact, using the Teacher’s Sense of Teacher Efficacy Survey (Tschannen-Moran & Woolfolk Hoy, 2001), and the Collective Teacher Efficacy Scale (Tschannen-Moran & Barr, 2004). Equity traps are often “both individual and collective, often reinforced among administrators and teachers through formal and informal communication, assumptions, and beliefs” (McKenzie & Schuerich, 2004, p. 603). Therefore, examining these perceptions at both levels was useful in identifying equity concerns.

The second phase of data collection included standardized, open-ended interviews (Bogdan & Biklen, 2018; Saldaña, 2021) with participants to develop a more detailed and refined understanding of these beliefs. These interviews included open-ended questions that allowed participants to elaborate on their experiences and beliefs regarding rurality and rural education, their beliefs about students and their influence as teachers, and what they see as challenges to student achievement. These interviews were then followed by an optional focus group discussion (Bogdan & Biklen, 2018; Saldaña, 2021) in which participants were be able to converse with one another about and elaborate on the topics introduced in initial interviews. Both the initial interviews and the focus group discussion utilized question sets that were “carefully worded and arranged, with the intention of taking each respondent through the same questions in the same order” (Bogdan & Biklen, 2018, p. 75). Data collected from these sessions were then transcribed, coded, and analyzed to identify recurring themes, narratives, and expressed beliefs prevalent in the
school community. Saldaña (2021) described coding as “reverberative” and “cyclical,”
expressing the need to compare “data to data, data to code, code to code, code to
category, category to category,” and “category back to data” (p. 88). Thus, the analysis,
further described in the sections that follow, was an iterative process involving multiple
passes through the collected data using both “first cycle” and “second cycle” coding
methods (Saldaña). Coupled with the efficacy data, this analysis served as a means of
triangulating for a clearer picture of emerging patterns of thought and messaging related
to the intersectionality of cultural beliefs, perceptions of efficacy, and their potential
connections to instructional practice.

**Instruments**

As noted in the description of the research design, this study included two
efficacy surveys, as well standardized interview and focus group protocols. Each of these
instruments, the rationale behind them, and the processes for establishing reliability and
validity are described in detail in the sections that follow.

**Teacher and Collective Efficacy Surveys**

In the first phase of data collection, data were collected on perceptions of both
individual and collective potential for impact, using the *Teacher’s Sense of Teacher
Efficacy Survey* (Tschannen-Moran & Woolfolk Hoy, 2001) (Appendix B), and the
*Teacher’s Sense of Teacher Efficacy* survey is a 24-item survey that asks teachers to rate
what they believe to be their ability to make a difference in student learning. Items were
coded by efficacy in student engagement, efficacy in instructional strategies, and efficacy
in classroom management, and respondents rated their sense of efficacy for each item on
a scale of one to nine, with one being the lowest sense of efficacy and nine being the highest. Scores were calculated for each of the aforementioned domains, as well as for overall efficacy ratings, and are reported both individually and collectively. Developed by Tschannen-Moran and Woolfolk Hoy at The Ohio State University, the instrument underwent a rigorous, multi-study factor analysis and construct validity assessment, in which it was positively correlated with other measures of teacher efficacy, providing evidence for construct validity and reliability. Validity and reliability in this study were established by adherence to the developers’ recommended administration and analysis protocols.

The Collective Efficacy Scale (Tschannen-Moran & Barr, 2004) is a 12 item survey that asks teachers to rate what they believe to be their collective ability to have an impact on student outcomes and behaviors through instructional strategies and behavioral initiatives. Respondents rated their sense of efficacy for each item on scale of one to nine, with one being the lowest sense of efficacy and nine being the highest. Scores were calculated for each of the aforementioned domains, as well as for overall efficacy ratings, and are reported both individually and collectively. The reliability and validity of this instrument were established through a comprehensive, multi-phase analysis which found content, criterion-related, and predictive validity evidence for scores on the collective efficacy scale as well as strong reliability evidence. Validity and reliability in this study were established by adherence to the developers’ recommended administration and analysis protocols.

The second phase of data collection included semi-structured interviews with participants. These interviews included open-ended questions that allowed participants to
elaborate on their experiences and beliefs regarding rurality and rural education, their beliefs about students and their influence as teachers, and what they see as challenges to student achievement—the aim, as described by Bogdan and Biklen (2018), was to explore participants’ “way of viewing the world” (p. 101). A standard question protocol was followed in individual interviews to ensure the same questions and ordering were used across participants and that each participant’s voice is included in the data collected. In addition, question extensions were included in this protocol to provide opportunities for elaboration and clarification and facilitate more nuanced data and analysis. Interviews were then be followed by an optional focus group discussion in which participants were able to converse with one another about and elaborate on the topics introduced in initial interviews.

**Semi-Structured Interview Protocol**

The rationale behind the interview protocol (Appendix D) was to provide opportunities for probing participants’ experiences, feelings, and perceptions through questions that encourage elaboration and description. Questions were ordered to allow participants to first consider and reflect on their conceptions of rurality generally but then move into a more focused exploration of rurality as it relates to conceptions of local education. Although the questions were ordered to encourage the emergence of stories and narrative with each question loosely building on the preceding item, there was also a deliberate thematic looping between latter questions in an effort to facilitate multiple opportunities to delve into topics related to the research question. This helped ensure all relevant topics were addressed should time constraints prevent addressing all questions.
The first of these questions—“Please describe how you feel about living and learning in a rural community”—was intended to provide participants an opportunity to consider and discuss their feelings about rurality, as it pertains to both lived experience within a rural community and education, with opportunities for elaborating on these conceptions. This question aligned to the study’s research question in that it provided insight into participants’ beliefs about their rural community and school and the prevailing rural narratives for the participant. The second question—“How do you think your students feel about living and learning in a rural community?”—served as means of narrowing focus toward education, while exploring participants’ beliefs about their students and broader narratives, and provided insights related to the study’s investigation of the relationship between beliefs and perceptions of efficacy. The third question—“How would you describe the relationship between rural communities and broader society, and how does this relationship relate to education?”—served to contextualize these beliefs and perceptions within broader society and provided insights into the prevalence of peripheral narratives, while the fourth question—“Where do you see your students in the future, and what impact do you believe you have on these outcomes?”—provided further opportunity to explore participants’ beliefs about rural students and rural education, specifically as they relate to their perceptions of possibility. The first four questions were prioritized, as these provided open-ended opportunities for discussions that aligned with the research question in their focus on beliefs about rural communities, rural schools, rural students, and rural opportunities. Participants were then provided opportunities to expand on and clarify answers, as well as provide any additional talking
points they felt relevant, as these opportunities to extend discussions provided for more nuanced answers and understandings of these beliefs.

Focus Group Protocol

The purpose of the focus group, which included three participants—Betsy, Robert, and Shae—was to provide further opportunity to explore the themes and topics addressed within the individual interviews but in an accepting group context that allowed participants to interact and respond to one another and build on one another’s responses. While the individual interviews provided insights into individual beliefs and perceptions, the benefit of the focus group, as noted by Gibbs (1997), was that “attitudes, feelings and beliefs…are more likely to be revealed via the social gathering and the interaction which being in a focus group entails.” Furthermore, the use of the focus group provided for a multiplicity of views, as well as suggested typical group dynamics at the research site, providing for a deeper examination of conversational language patterns, group culture, and the degree of consensus and divergence in relation to conceptions of rurality, beliefs about rural education, and perceptions of both individual and collective efficacy.

To this end, the focus group was an organized but loosely structured conversation with prompts to help focus participant discussion. The prompts, outlined in the focus group protocol (Appendix E), began with engagement questions to introduce the topic of rurality somewhat generally and allow participants to explore personal experiences and perceptions, essentially priming the conversation for more focused discussion. Engagement questions asked participants to “discuss” their experiences “living, learning and teaching in a rural community,” as well as to define what rural means to them. Although primers, these questions allowed for further examination of participants’
perceptions of and beliefs about rural experiences and rurality. These engagement questions were followed by more focused exploratory questions related more directly to the research questions. The first of these questions asked participants to discuss the ways in which rural education differs from education elsewhere. This question was designed to facilitate discussion related to the strengths and challenges of rural education, as well as to help contextualize beliefs and perceptions in relation to broader society and provide insights into the prevalence of peripheral narratives. The remaining exploratory questions explored participants’ reasons for working in a rural context, as well as their motivations for staying, as these questions provided for additional insights into their perceptions of rural education. Exit questions and extension prompts provided opportunities for elaboration and clarification and facilitated more nuanced data and analysis.

Data Analysis

For the individual teacher efficacy data, scores were calculated for each of the coded domains—efficacy in student engagement, efficacy in instructional strategies, and efficacy in classroom management—as well as for overall efficacy ratings, and are reported for both the individual participants and the group (Appendix B). Similarly, data collected using the Collective Efficacy Scale were examined according to the coded domains of instructional strategies and student behavior, as well as overall scores, and are reported for individual participants and the group as a whole (Appendix C).

Given the open-ended nature of the interview questions and the potential for complex and nuanced responses, data collected from this source were transcribed and coded for overlapping themes in participant language. As noted above, the process was iterative and involved multiple passes through data sets in order to refine codes and categories. Data
were initially reviewed utilizing a combination of first cycle coding methods including descriptive coding—which provided a means of inventorying content—and In Vivo coding—which facilitated an initial analysis and organization of data related to participants’ perspectives—followed by affective coding methods—specifically “emotion coding” and “values coding”—as this provided for an initial investigation of subjective experience and the corresponding cognitive systems at work (Saldaña, 2021). Grounded theory coding methods, including Focused Coding and Axial Coding (Saldaña, 2021), were employed for second cycle coding to provide for a more formal thematic analysis and the identification of trends in participants’ perceptions. Appendix F provides the rudimentary means for an initial organization of descriptive data, which included anticipated categories based on the nature and alignment of questions included in the semi-structured interview and focus group protocols (Appendices D and E). These categories, however, were refined through the first and second cycle coding methods, with organization and visual representations modified accordingly.

Once interview and focus group data were transcribed, coded, and analyzed to identify recurring themes, narratives, and expressed beliefs prevalent in the school community, they were triangulated with the efficacy data, to provide a clearer picture of the intersectionality of cultural beliefs, perceptions of efficacy, and their potential connections to instructional practice. Overall design alignment is provided in the table below.
## Design Alignment

**Figure 2**

*Design Alignment Tool* (adapted from Kanyongo, 2017)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Question</th>
<th>Literature</th>
<th>Instrument</th>
<th>Analysis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| How do rural teachers’ beliefs about their communities and their schools relate to perceptions of efficacy regarding instructional impact and student outcomes? | • Azano & Biddle, 2019  
• Azano & Stewart, 2016  
• Donohoo, et al., 2018  
• Donohoo, et al., 2020  
• Hattie, 2016  
• Tschannen-Moran, et al., 1998 | • Teacher’s Sense of Teacher Efficacy Survey (Likert Scale Responses)  
• Collective Teacher Efficacy Scale (Likert Scale Responses)  
• Individual Survey Protocol  
• Focus Group Protocol | • Descriptive Statistics  
• Thematic analysis |
| What are rural teachers’ perceptions of efficacy regarding instructional impact and student outcomes? | • Donohoo, et al., 2018  
• Donohoo, et al., 2020  
• Hattie, 2016  
• Tschannen-Moran, et al., 1998  
• Tschannen-Moran & Woolfolk Hoy, 2001  
• Tschannen-Moran & Barr, 2004 | • Teacher’s Sense of Teacher Efficacy Survey (Likert Scale Responses)  
• Collective Teacher Efficacy Scale (Likert Scale Responses)  
• Questions 4, 5, 6, and 8 Semi-Structured Interview Protocol  
• Questions 4, 5, and 6 Focus Group Protocol | • Descriptive Statistics  
• Thematic analysis |
| What thematic patterns can be identified regarding rural teachers’ beliefs about rurality, rural communities, and rural schools? | • Azano & Biddle, 2019  
• Azano & Stewart, 2016  
• Cunningham, et al., 2005  
• Peine, et al., 2020  
• Peirce, 1877  
• Saldaña, 2021 | • Questions 1-9 Semi-Structured Interview Protocol  
• Question 1-6 Focus Group Protocol | • Thematic analysis |

*Note.* Figure 2 presents the alignment between the study’s methodological design, its primary research questions, and the literature informing its design.
CHAPTER FOUR

Introduction

Chapter Four presents the findings of the teacher efficacy and collective efficacy surveys, as well as the perceptions and conceptions captured shared during the semi-structured interviews and/or the optional post-interview focus group. Participants’ descriptions of feelings and experiences related to living and learning in a rural community are included, as are their perceptions of students’ feelings and experiences, their perceptions of rurality in relation to broader society, and their stated beliefs regarding student outcomes. The emergent themes of the analyses and close readings of interview and focus group transcripts are shared and discussed in relation to the existing body of literature on rurality presented in Chapter Two. Emergent themes include but are not limited to the significance of community and relationships, perceptions of peripheralization, conceptions of success, attribution, and impacts on student outcomes. Processes for analysis will be discussed throughout, and responses from participants will be included and discussed in the context of the theoretical framework.

Efficacy Surveys

In the first phase of data collection data were collected on perceptions of both individual and collective potential for impact, using the Teacher’s Sense of Teacher Efficacy Survey (Tschannen-Moran & Woolfolk Hoy, 2001), and the Collective Teacher Efficacy Scale (Tschannen-Moran & Barr, 2004). Both surveys were distributed to participants at the school and were returned upon completion. Items for each of these surveys are coded by domain, thus scores for both surveys were calculated by domains, as well as for overall efficacy ratings, and are reported both individually and collectively.
Teacher’s Sense of Teacher Efficacy Survey

The Teacher’s Sense of Teacher Efficacy survey is a 24-item survey that asks teachers to rate what they believe to be their ability to make a difference in student learning. Items are coded by efficacy in student engagement, efficacy in instructional strategies, and efficacy in classroom management, and respondents rate their sense of efficacy for each item on a scale of one to nine, with one being the lowest sense of efficacy and nine being the highest. In Tschannen-Moran and Woolfolk Hoy’s (2001) multi-study factor analysis and construct validity assessment of the instrument, the researchers found an overall mean of 7.1 with a standard deviation of .94. The means for the Engagement domain and Instruction domain were 7.3 with a standard deviation of 1.1, while the mean for the Management domain was 6.7 with a standard deviation of 1.1.

For this study, scores were calculated for each of the aforementioned domains, as well as for overall efficacy ratings, and are reported both individually and collectively. Although collective means are reported, given the study’s small sample size and the variance between participants’ responses, these findings are likely skewed, so there will be minimal discussion of collective means. Findings are presented in figures 3, 4, and 5.
Figure 3

_Teachers’ Sense of Teacher Efficacy Survey Data by Participant (Mean Scores)_

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Betsy</th>
<th>Kyla</th>
<th>Robert</th>
<th>Shae</th>
<th>Tia</th>
<th>Tom</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Engagement</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4.25</td>
<td>7.125</td>
<td>7.25</td>
<td>4.375</td>
<td>6.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instruction</td>
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<td>5.75</td>
<td>7.75</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>6.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classroom Management</td>
<td>6.375</td>
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<td>7.5</td>
<td>7.25</td>
<td>4.875</td>
<td>7.625</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall</td>
<td>5.917</td>
<td>5.292</td>
<td>7.458</td>
<td>7.16</td>
<td>4.917</td>
<td>7.042</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 4

_Teacher’s Sense of Teacher Efficacy by Participant_

>Note. Figure 4 presents the overall and domain mean scores on the _Teacher’s Sense of Teacher Efficacy Survey_ for each of the six participants._
An initial review of the data showed four of the six participants to fall below the overall mean reported by Tschannen-Moran and Woolfolk Hoy (2001) in their study of the efficacy instrument. Although both Robert and Shae were above the 7.1 mean and Tom’s reported ratings just below, these three participants fell within one standard deviation of the instrument’s reported mean. Betsy, Kyla, and Tia, however, rated themselves significantly lower, falling more than a standard deviation below 7.1. Furthermore, all participants except Shae rated themselves lowest in the student engagement domain, with three of the four participants more than a standard deviation below the reported mean.

**Collective Teacher Efficacy Scale**

The *Collective Teacher Efficacy Scale* (Tschannen-Moran & Barr, 2004) is a 12 item survey that asks to teachers to rate what they believe to be their collective ability to have an impact on student outcomes and behaviors through instructional strategies and behavioral initiatives. Respondents rated their sense of efficacy for each item on scale of
one to nine, with one being the lowest sense of efficacy and nine being the highest.

Scores were calculated for each of the aforementioned domains, as well as for overall efficacy ratings, and are reported both individually and collectively in figures 6, 7, and 8.

**Figure 6**

*Collective Teacher Efficacy Data by Participant (Mean Scores)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Betsy</th>
<th>Kyla</th>
<th>Robert</th>
<th>Shae</th>
<th>Tia</th>
<th>Tom</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Instruction</td>
<td>7.83</td>
<td>5.667</td>
<td>8.167</td>
<td>6.667</td>
<td>5.833</td>
<td>8.167</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behavior</td>
<td>5.167</td>
<td>4.667</td>
<td>7.333</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5.333</td>
<td>8.167</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>5.167</td>
<td>7.75</td>
<td>5.833</td>
<td>5.583</td>
<td>8.167</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 7**

*Collective Teacher Efficacy Data by Participant*

*Note.* Figure 7 presents the overall and domain mean scores on the *Collective Teacher Efficacy Scale* for each of the six participants.
Figure 8

*Collective Teacher Efficacy Scale Collective Data by Domain*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Domain</th>
<th>Rating</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Instruction</td>
<td>7.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Behavior</td>
<td>6.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall</td>
<td>7.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Figure 8 presents overall mean ratings across participants for each of the assessed domains.

**Analysis of Efficacy Data**

As noted in Chapter Two, decades of educational research have suggested the significance of both individual teacher efficacy—teacher’s beliefs about their ability to perform at a given level of attainment and positively impact student learning and outcomes—and collective efficacy—the extent to which perceptions of collective ability to impact student outcomes are shared across teachers in a school building—to student achievement and overall outcomes (Donohoo, et al., 2018; Donohoo, et al., 2020; Hattie, 2016; Tschannen-Moran, et al., 1998). As explained by Tschannen-Moran, et al., perceptions of efficacy influence “thought patterns and emotions that enable actions in which people expend substantial effort in pursuit of goals, persist in the face of adversity, rebound from temporary setbacks, and exercise some control over events that affect their lives” (p. 206). Research suggests that when expectations for success are high, educators work with greater “persistence and strong resolve,” but when educators’ perceptions are
“filtered through the belief that there is very little they can do to influence student
achievement, negative beliefs pervade the school culture” (Donohoo, et al., 2018, p. 42).
Thus, examining teacher’s beliefs regarding their ability to impact student outcomes is
central to this study.

An analysis of the data revealed varying levels of perceived efficacy between
data revealed varying levels of perceived efficacy between
participants, as well as between the assessed domains on each instrument. TSTE overall
mean scores ranged from 4.917 to 7.458. TSTE mean scores in the student engagement
domain ranged from 4.375 to 7.25 with three of the six participants scoring a 5 or below.
In the instructional domain, participants’ mean scores ranged from 5.5 to 7.75, with four
of six participants scoring above 6, and mean scores within the classroom management
domain ranged from 4.917 to 7.45, with four of six participants scoring above 6. In
general participants reported a greater sense of efficacy in regard to instructional
strategies and classroom management skills, while student engagement ratings were
noticeably lower than other scores for five of six participants.

CTES data also suggested varying levels of perceived collective efficacy between
individual participants and between the assessed domains. Over all collective efficacy
mean scores ranged from 5.167 to 8.167. Instructional domain mean scores ranged from
5.667 to 8.167 with three of six participants scoring above 7, while mean scores in the
student behavior domain, ranged from 4.667 to 8.167 with four of six participants having
mean ratings below 6. With the exception of Tom, who reported equal perceptions of
efficacy in both the instructional and student behavior domains, CTES data showed all
participants reported a higher perception of collective efficacy in regard to collective
instructional ability than in regard to student behaviors. Data also showed lower
perceptions of collective efficacy among female participants, but with the exception of
Shae, all participants reported higher perceptions of collective than individual efficacy.

Although data from the efficacy instruments would typically be examined by
overall and categorical means, in an attempt to recognize patterns within efficacy
perceptions and to better understand the variance between participants and domains,
participants’ responses to individual survey items were also analyzed to identify highest
and lowest scoring responses across participants. An item analysis allowed for a more
nuanced examination of teacher beliefs and provided for a more thorough triangulation of
data and a more detailed discussion of efficacy perceptions in relation to interview data.
The item analysis revealed that participants’ ratings generally tended to cluster around a
particular two to three point score range with no noticeably higher scoring items. For
example, Kyla’s responses predominantly fell around a five. However, this analysis also
showed that most participants had outlying low scoring items that they rated two to three
points below the other clustered items, impacting individual mean scores. Further
analysis revealed that these outlying low scoring items were repeated across participants.
On the TSTE, the item regarding teacher’s ability to “get through to the most difficult
students” was an outlying low score for four of the six participants, while the item related
to assisting families and the item related to motivating uninterested students were
outlying low scores for three of six participants. These frequencies are presented below.
Similar patterns emerged in the CTES. The item regarding school personnel’s
collectively ability “to get students to believe they can do well in schoolwork” was an
outlying low-scoring item for three of six participants, as was item regarding teachers’
response to defiant students. The survey item regarding teachers’ collective ability “to
control disruptive behavior” was an outlying low score for five of six participants. These frequencies are presented in figures 9 and 10.

Figure 9

*Teacher Sense of Teacher Efficacy Outlier Frequencies*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TSTE Outlying Low-Rated Questions</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How much can you assist families in helping their children do well in school?</td>
<td>3/6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How much can you do to get through to the most difficult students?</td>
<td>4/6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How much can you do to motivate students who show low interest in school?</td>
<td>3/6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Figure 9 shows the patterns across participants of outlying low-rated items on the TSTE.

Figure 10

*Collective Teacher Efficacy Scale Outlier Frequencies*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CTES Outlying Low-Rated Questions</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How much can school personnel in your school do to control disruptive behavior?</td>
<td>5/6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How much can your school do to get students to believe they can do well in schoolwork?</td>
<td>3/6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How well can teachers in your school respond to defiant students?</td>
<td>3/6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Figure 10 shows the patterns across participants of outlying low-rated items on the CTES.

An interesting commonality emerged amongst the outlying items in that they were all items related to the behaviors and/or beliefs of students and/or their families, while items regarding teacher beliefs and behaviors fell within each participant’s general
cluster. These findings, although limited by sample size and informal analysis, may suggest, as Bandura (1977; 1993) proposed and Soodak and Podell (1996) described, a separation of outcome expectations and efficacy expectations. Soodak and Podell describe outcome expectations as “a person's estimation that a given behavior will lead to a specific outcome” (p. 401). Efficacy expectations, however, are described as “the individual's belief that he or she is capable of demonstrating the behaviors necessary to achieve the outcome” (p. 402). According to Soodak and Podell, “the distinction between efficacy expectations and outcome expectations implies that teachers hold two independent beliefs, the belief that they can teach, and the belief that student outcomes are due to their teaching” (p. 409), suggesting that teachers can simultaneously have high levels of self-efficacy in terms of their professional abilities but limited belief that these abilities affect student outcomes. This separation of self and outcomes may contribute to teachers’ sense of responsibility regarding student outcomes and will be discussed further in relation to interview data in later sections.

Conceptions of Rurality: Interview & Focus Group Data

As noted in Chapter Three, the second phase of data collection included individual interviews and an optional focus group. Standardized protocols were utilized in each. Data included transcripts and notes from the resulting conversations. This section presents a detailed description of the interview process, followed by a presentation of the data collected. Data is initially presented by participant with discussion of patterns identified within individual interviews. Discussion of patterns across participants and questions is then provided, followed by the themes and tensions that emerged within this data.
Setting & Interview Process

Each of the individual interviews was conducted face-to-face in the participant’s classroom in an effort to increase comfort during the interview process and were recorded using Zoom, as well as a voice memo application. Interviews adhered to the Semi Structured Interview Protocol presented in Chapter Three to ensure the same questions and ordering were used across participants and that each participant’s voice was included in the data collected. Questions included in the interview were designed to elicit responses related to the participant’s general perceptions of rurality, as well as those related to rural education and opportunity/possibility.

The optional focus group, although open to all participants, included only three participants—Betsy, Robert, and Shae—as a result of scheduling conflicts. Multiple attempts were made to schedule the event at a time that could include all participants. Doing so in a timely manner, however, proved challenging, so the focus group was held at the time that provided for the greatest number of participants. The focus group was conducted face-to-face in the researcher’s classroom and adhered to the Focus Group Protocol presented in Chapter Three, which was designed to facilitate an organized but loosely structured conversation about participants’ experiences and perspectives of rurality, rural education, opportunity, and student outcomes. This conversation was recorded using Zoom, as well as a voice memo application.

Audio recordings were then transcribed using transcription software and these transcripts then reviewed and corrected using the audio recordings and notes collected during the interviews and focus group. Multiple passes were made through these data to ensure accuracy; however, due to recording quality some portions of the interview were
not able to be fully transcribed. In these instances, interview notes and audio recordings were utilized to compose response summaries. The process of “respondent validation,” also known as “member checks,” as described by Merriam and Tisdell (2015), was used to ensure the reliability of these summaries and the produced transcripts. As noted by Maxwell (cited in Merriam & Tisdell, 2015), respondent validation is the “single most important way of ruling out the possibility of misinterpreting the meaning what participants say and do and the perspective they have on what is going on” (p. 246). During this process, feedback was solicited from those interviewed to ensure accurate transcription and accurate representation of the points of view expressed during the interviews and focus group. Transcripts and summaries then underwent a rigorous and iterative process of coding and analysis in to identify recurring themes, narratives, and expressed beliefs prevalent in the school community. As described by Saldaña (2021), this process was “reverberative” and “cyclical,” comparing “data to data, data to code, code to code, code to category, category to category,” and “category back to data” (p. 88). The sections that follow provide an overview of the data collected, the identified patterns, and the emergent themes of this analyses and close readings of interview and focus group transcripts.

**Interview Data by Participant**

This section will provide an overview of participant’s responses to each of the interview questions. The data are organized by participant with responses to each of the prompts presented in the order it was presented to the participant. A brief description of patterns observed within each interview is included. Patterns observed across interviews will be discussed in the next section.
Betsy is a 54-year-old female whose teaching experience is exclusively rural. While Betsy began her teaching career 12 years ago in a neighboring district with similar demographics to those at Belkin, she has been teaching at Belkin for the last seven years. Betsy’s reported efficacy data included a 5.917 overall rating on the Teacher’s Sense of Teacher Efficacy survey, with her highest self-rating in the area of instruction (6.375) and her lowest in student engagement (5). Her rating on the Collective Teacher Efficacy Scale was a 6.5 overall, with her highest rating in the area of instruction (7.83) and her lowest in student behaviors (5.167). The interview with Betsy began with a discussion of her feelings about living and learning in a rural community, which were largely positive. The conversation then shifted to students and learning, during which there seemed to be more emphasis on negative dynamics and attributes.

Prompt: Please describe how you feel about living and learning in a rural community. When asked to discuss her feeling about living and learning in a rural community, Betsy focused predominantly on the positives of rurality, namely the smallness and closeness of the rural community, which she emphasized through her repeated mention of “neighbors” being “accountable to each other,” “close relationships,” and “genuine concern” for one another.

She also expressed that the lack of interaction with the outside world is a positive—rural schools and communities can “fly under the radar” and aren’t always “accountable to some of the policies and issues that people at the top try to push.” She used gender issues as an example – “wasn’t even a conversation here.”

Prompt: How do you think your students feel about living and learning in a rural community? As we shifted into students’ feelings about living and learning in a
rural community, Betsy commented that she does not believe students “give much thought to it.” “It is what it is… the kids don’t think about it,” stated Betsy. “This is all they know so they don’t aspire to much else. They don’t know what else is out there.” She then added that she doesn’t believe families are having conversations about rurality and broader society at home. “This is where they are, and they aren’t thinking about it or having conversations about it at home, so they just accept it.”

**Prompt: How would you describe the relationship between rural communities and broader society?** When asked about the community’s relationship with broader society, she spoke to a lack of relationship, commenting that “there is no relationship… They’re not exposed to broader society.” She noted that while the school attempts to “bring some of that in,” it’s “not a lot” because of where the community is situated geographically—“all the way out here.” She further explained that it is difficult to “broaden horizons” because it is not happening at home. “It’s a generational community,” said Betsy. “Their parents grew up here; their grandparents grew up here, and they don’t really go any further than this… These kids exist in a tunnel.”

**Prompt: In your opinion, how does this relationship relate to education?** Asked about how this relationship connects to education, Betsy suggested that while this lack of relationship can at times distance rural schools and communities from national trends and policy, which she identified as a positive aspect of rural education, the lack of connection with broader society can also depreciate the impact of education. “All they know is what’s in front of them,” said Betsy. “I don’t know that education really matters to them because they don’t know what’s out there.” She then returned to the role of families, commenting that “families don’t value education.” “We can try to expose them
to things and bring broader society in,” explained Betsy, “but beyond that they just aren’t exposed and so they aren’t thinking about it.”

**Prompt: Where do you see your students in the future?** The question of where she sees her students in the future, prompted a sigh and a somewhat seemingly frustrated response in Betsy. She stated that she thought most students would stay in the community or close by and emphasized what she described as self-imposed limitations that she attributed to family and socioeconomic status. She also returned to students’ lack of awareness regarding broader society, commenting that they don’t know what else is “out there,” a point she reiterated five times.

“I see my students in this county,” said Betsy. “There’s these limits they’ve imposed on themselves based on their socioeconomic status or their being from [Belkin], and that’s generational… That has to do with their background—no value of education, no support, no goals for the future. Education is not important.” She ended, commenting “it’s sad, depressing.”

**Prompt: What impact do you believe you have on these outcomes?** When asked about the impact she felt she had on these outcomes, Betsy expressed a belief that she had “very little” influence because she was up against generational values and habits. “I just don’t feel like education can impact,” said Betsy. “A lot of them have horrible backgrounds,” she explained, noting poverty, family dynamics, and substance abuse issues. “There’s no goal setting because they’re not talking about this stuff at home…They’re not sitting around the table at night having conversations about this stuff.” She further commented that students have to have “that internal drive to succeed beyond what society says they should, and most don’t have it.” “They’re not getting that
at home,” she said. When asked if this is true of all students, Betsy noted a single exception, adding that this is not the story of most students and that only a “small percentage” will “try to succeed.”

**Identified patterns in Betsy’s responses.** A number of patterns were identified within Betsy’s responses. The first of these were references to rural strengths which centered on community and relationships. When asked about her own experiences living and learning in a rural community, Betsy was largely positive, making multiple mentions of the closeness of the community, the concern for one another that exists in that community, and relationships oriented in genuine care for “neighbors” both in school and community. Discussions of students, however, produced more deficit oriented responses. Betsy made multiple references to her assumption that students do not care and are not thinking about their futures. She also repeatedly commented on the role of families in the creation of this perceived deficit, mentioning families in her response to every question regarding students. Within this discussion of families, a lack of awareness, a failure to value education, and low expectations were repeated points. Additionally, Betsy repeatedly referenced “out there,” creating a clear distinction between the rural community and broader society, but often emphasizing “out there” as a sort of hallmark of success. Other recurring points included low expectations for students beyond school and seeing herself as having a minimal impact, a finding that may connect to lower efficacy ratings in areas related to student engagement, student behaviors, and student outcomes.

**Kyla**

Kyla is a 28-year-old female who has been teaching at Belkin for six years. She is a graduate of the school district in which she currently teaches. Kyla’s reported efficacy
data included a 5.292 overall rating on the *Teacher’s Sense of Teacher Efficacy* survey, with her highest self-rating in the area of classroom management (5.875) and her lowest in student engagement (4.25). Her rating on the *Collective Teacher Efficacy Scale* was a 5.167 overall, with her highest rating in the area of instruction (5.66) and her lowest in student behaviors (4.66). Kyla, like Betsy, began by highlighting her own positive experiences living and learning in a rural community, but as the conversation shifted to students and education in rural communities, there seemed to be a greater emphasis on challenges.

**Prompt: Please describe how you feel about living and learning in a rural community.** Asked about her own experiences in a rural community, Kyla commented that she “loved it,” and much like Betsy noted that she enjoyed the closeness of a small town and that people in the community “knew her, helped her, and cared about her.” She discussed her experiences in school, stating that “in school this was the same.” She said her teachers all knew her and her family, encouraged her to do well, and supported her in goals, which she added is why she wanted to be a teacher. She explained that a few of her friends from childhood did leave the area because they preferred the faster pace and anonymity of the city, but she said that she would hate that and preferred the quiet and closeness of a small town. “I wouldn’t want that,” said Kyla. “I like the small town community, where everyone knows each other and looks out for each other.”

**Prompt: How do you think your students feel about living and learning in a rural community?** When asked about students’ feelings about living and learning in a rural community, Kyla focused on a lack of awareness about what else is “out there,” as well as generational patterns in the community. “I’m not sure they think about it,” said
Kyla. “Most, I think, want to stay here. They like it, but it’s all they know.” She noted many enjoy rural activities such as “hunting, fishing, and four-wheelers” and that this is life “as they know it”. She expressed that she thinks attitudes towards rural communities are generational and explained that most parents in the community are those who “never wanted more” or desired to leave the area and raise their children with the same values. “Our kids here now are kids of parents who didn’t want anything else, so the kids don’t care about going anywhere else. This is all they know,” said Kyla.

Prompt: How would you describe the relationship between rural communities and broader society? Regarding the relationship between rural communities and broader society, Kyla remarked, “I don’t know that there is much of one,” and proceeded to discuss the lack of awareness about life outside the rural community. She mentioned that while the internet has provided a bit more awareness than in the past, most people in rural communities “focus on what is familiar and in their own community because they can.” However, she discussed how this can be a limitation for students and that this lack of awareness often affects attitudes towards school and where they see themselves in the future.

Prompt: In your opinion, how does this relationship relate to education? Building on her response to the previous question, Kyla exemplified what she saw as a lack of awareness, commenting, “You ask these kids what they want to do, and they say they’ll work at McDonald's or Walmart. Ask them to think about work and it’s just a list of things that they know from here. They don't know that there's other things. They don't know that there's other things out there that they can do because their parents and their parents’ parents don't have elaborate jobs, you know, they just don’t know…”
“We sit in STEM Club and talk about these skills that they can use and jobs that are out there— that they can actually go do something cool and exciting—and they have no idea,” she continued. “It’s almost like they don’t get it, and I think that's just because, like I said, they don’t see it. The families started here and stay here, and that’s all they know.”

Kyla further referenced a career exploration event through Ohio Means Jobs that allowed students to explore various careers, and noted that even when exploring possible careers of interest, most students seemed disinterested. “I do think that, you know, it introduces them to different jobs and classes, the job search or whatever they did it with the career lady, and things like that might open their eyes,” said Kyla, “but I don’t see much really making those connections that they see relates to them.” Kyla suggested that one challenge is that students don’t see these jobs in their daily life, so the classes don’t always seem interesting to students, and students do not see the value of education in relation to them. “They don’t see this stuff, so they're not going to have an interest in school…” said Kyla. “Honestly, there aren’t many who want to do well in school who want to go get a cool job that makes them money because their parents don't have that, you know?”

**Prompt: Where do you see your students in the future?** When asked about where she sees her students, Kyla also responded that she anticipates most will stay in the community. “Most won’t leave this town,” she said. “We don’t have many kids who want to do well or who want to work for that awesome job because their parents don’t… Most will just end up getting a job close by doing whatever.” When asked if there are exceptions to this outcome, she said there are some, but noted she expects it to be a small
percentage of students. “A handful I can see going to college and getting a good job or going somewhere to see what else is out there,” remarked Kyla, “but most are not leaving this town.”

**Prompt: What impact do you believe you have on these outcomes?** When asked about her impact on these outcomes, she began with “I don’t know.” She then expressed her hopes of being a positive and encouraging influence. “I want to encourage them and teach them as much as I can,” Kyla said, “but I know a lot of them just don’t care. They don’t see education as valuable.” Kyla further noted that she hopes to be a positive influence for those who do. “Those who want to go do something with their life, I want to be an encouragement,” she said. “I'd love to be able to be supportive and teach them as much as I can. I want to be someone they can later look back on and say, “Hey, thanks for motivating me to continue or helping me through math, thanks for being there,” said Kyla, “but there's only a handful of kids who are wanting that. Those kids are what keep you here.”

Kyla also noted that her impact on student outcomes often depends on a student’s background. She mentioned that there are some kids who “come up like I did,” whose families promote education and who do want to want to go to college to be “a teacher or a nurse or something that we see every day,” but added that “a lot of students don’t want that, and they don’t know that there’s other jobs out there.” Kyla then mentioned the prevalence of vocational programs in the area and said she “can see some of them doing that,” but she emphasized that a lack of visibility of the usefulness of education within local communities coupled with a generational lack of aspiring beyond what is visible
within local communities seems to limit influence and aspiration. “They know high school and they know that they need to do that,” remarked Kyla, “but that's about it.”

**Identified patterns in Kyla’s responses.** Within Kyla’s interview several patterns emerged. Rural strengths centering on closeness, community, and relationships, both in school and community were among these. Other patterns included the concept of “out there” and references to seeing and not seeing. Similar to Betsy, discussions of students produced some deficit-oriented patterns, particularly in reference to the role of families in students’ perceptions of and attitudes towards education. Again, a lack of awareness, a failure to value education, and low expectations were repeated points. Additionally, Kyla also made repeated references to “out there,” creating a clear distinction between the rural community and broader society, and much like Betsy, “out there” often appeared in the context of possibility and perceptions of success. Other recurring points included students not leaving the community and seeing herself as having a limited impact, despite hoping for more. Kyla, like Betsy, seemed to perceive students and families as lacking knowledge or awareness, which might account for variances in Kyla’s reported efficacy perceptions, particularly those related to student and family behaviors and engagement.

**Robert**

Robert is a 59-year-old male who was raised in the Belkin community and graduated from the school. He has been teaching at Belkin for 20 years. Robert’s reported efficacy data included a 7.458 overall rating on the Teacher’s Sense of Teacher Efficacy survey, with his highest self-rating in the area of instruction (7.75) and his lowest in student engagement (7.125). His rating on the Collective Teacher Efficacy Scale was a 7.75 overall, with his highest rating in the area of instruction (8.16) and his lowest in student behaviors (7.333).
Prompt: Please describe how you feel about living and learning in a rural community. When discussing his feelings about living and learning in a rural community, Robert also focused on the positives of smaller communities and schools, noting the deep sense of community that develops both within the school and beyond, as well as making multiple references to how much people in small communities care about one another. He said this was one of the reasons he chose to stay in the rural community.

“I grew up here, went to school here, and I chose to come back here because I like it here,” said Robert. “Our community is a little more close-knit. It pulls together to help each other more than other places.” He noted that this closeness is a strength both within the community and within the school because it allows for a better understanding of and more focused attention on students’ needs. Although he emphasized the benefits of the smaller, rural environment and the closeness it fosters, he also acknowledged that there are some “downsides,” which he identified as “less exposure to the outside world and maybe certain experiences,” as well as some limits to what classes and opportunities can offered. “Not every kid is going to get every class that they want or be able to learn about everything they are interested in,” said Robert. “We just don’t have the numbers to offer all that in the building, but there are other options and ways getting what you need.”

Prompt: How do you think your students feel about living and learning in a rural community? When asked about his students’ perceptions of living and learning in a rural community, Robert mentioned that some students may think there are better things “out there” but added he thought most students like the smaller size of the school because they know they benefit from the “tight-knit” community. “This is all they know, except what they might hear,” explained Robert, “and other than some thinking there might be
more opportunities at a bigger school or thinking they can get a better education at a bigger school, I think most actually enjoy it here.” He noted that he’s spoken with students and teachers from larger schools, and “they don’t have that same sense of community.” “At big-city schools, they don’t know half the kids they graduate with, and teachers don’t really get to know a lot of their students,” said Robert, “so I think our kids benefit from the fact that we’re smaller, and I think they know that.”

Prompt: How would you describe the relationship between rural communities and broader society? Robert described the relationship between rural communities and broader society as “at a distance.” He noted the rural community in many ways exists “outside” of broader society and that people in rural communities don’t always see or even need to see what else is “out there.” He said this separateness can be a benefit, especially for those who do not enjoy the faster pace of urban life. “I mean, it can be a disadvantage I guess because you don’t really have the experience of the big city hustle and bustle, but having that experience doesn’t really guarantee you’re getting something better. I mean, I prefer the slower pace and I think it’s all more personal.”

Robert, however, also noted that this relationship can be a detriment in terms of bringing in people and services because many people want the options and amenities of more metropolitan settings. He specified doctors, teachers, and other professionals as those who typically do not want to move into a rural community. “That part hurts rural areas because we don’t have a lot to offer outsiders,” said Robert. “A lot of people won’t come, which means even less in some areas.” He noted that he wished people could see the good in rural communities and begin investing in them, adding that broader society
seems to have little interest in developing rural areas, which he said contributes to people’s inability to see the strengths of rural communities.

**Prompt: In your opinion, how does this relationship relate to education?** Robert connected that relationship with broader society to education, by noting its impact on perceptions of rurality and rural schools. He explained that often rurality is presented to students as some sort of deficit or that their education and experiences in a rural school and community are less than those elsewhere, but emphasized that he does not believe this to be the case. “A big school and big city experience doesn’t guarantee anything,” said Robert. “It’s what you put into it.” He commented that those students “who actually try to do well can do whatever they want” and repeated the phrase “you get out of it what you put into it” several times. Robert further noted that some students leave the school to go to a somewhat bigger school in a neighboring district, thinking they will get something better, but said he’s curious if it really is better and if so, how. “Are you really getting a better education?” asked Robert. “I mean, I’d like to know are you REALLY getting a better education. If so, I’d like to know what’s different. There’s a good study for you.”

Additionally, Robert noted that policy and government perception of rural communities do come to bear on education. He said, “money talks and rural areas can’t always compete.” Because of this dynamic, Robert said rural schools don’t always have all the extras and “have to think about the best use of resources,” but he again emphasized that this doesn’t mean other places are better. “You get what you put into it,” said Robert, who then provided his son as an example, noting that his son grew up in the community, went to school there, and has now “gone off” to college and wants to be a
college professor. He explained that his son received the same education as all these other kids and is doing great because “like I said, you get out of it what you put into it.”

**Prompt: Where do you see your students in the future?** When asked where he sees students in the future, Robert said a small number may go to college but said he sees most students staying locally. He, however, stressed that he sees this as a good thing because “we need people locally.” “A lot them will stay here. Most of them stay here, probably doing more hands-on, laborer-type jobs,” explained Robert, “but that’s okay, we need people to do all kinds of jobs.” He noted the need for various types of laborers and further explained that the oil and gas industry “is still doing well for now, so that may be where many land.”

**Prompt: What impact do you believe you have on these outcomes?** When asked about his impact on student outcomes, Robert expressed a greater certainty of his impact than that expressed by Kyla and Betsy. He explained that teachers are positioned to “broaden [students’] knowledge” by sharing their own experiences and struggles and some of the opportunities available to them. He also noted that he believed rural teachers may have a greater influence than teachers elsewhere because of “small class sizes” and their ability “to get on those kid’s that don’t want to put forth effort.” “At big schools, kids get lost in the shuffle,” said Robert. “Here we know them and can keep on them.”

Robert did, however, note that not all students and families value education in the same way and that this can influence how much impact a teacher can have because ultimately “whatever you put into it is what you get out of it.”

**Identified patterns in Robert’s responses.** Several patterns were identified within Robert’s interview responses. Like Betsy and Kyla, Robert spoke repeatedly to the
closeness of rural schools/communities and the ability to leverage relationships within these contexts. He also expressed positive attitudes towards rural schools more generally, as well as frustrations with perceptions that education is better elsewhere. Robert placed significant emphasis on meritocracy or a “bootstrapper” mentality with students as the locus of control, repeatedly referencing students “getting out” of school “what they put into it,” and citing his own son as evidence of this. Additionally, much like Betsy and Kyla, Robert made clear distinctions between rural communities and broader society, also utilizing the phrase “out there” frequently, and making repeated references to the difference between “here” and “there”. Other observations included multiple references to students’ lack of awareness and the importance of valuing education. Robert’s emphasis on meritocracy and bootstrapper values provides insight into his efficacy perceptions, as he seems to distinguish between his own ability and influence and student outcomes.

**Tia**

Tia is a 31-year-old female who has taught at the school for 8 years. Tia’s reported efficacy data included a 4.917 overall rating on the *Teacher’s Sense of Teacher Efficacy* survey, with her highest self-rating in the area of instruction (5.5) and her lowest in student engagement (4.375). Her rating on the *Collective Teacher Efficacy Scale* was a 5.583 overall, with her highest rating in the area of instruction (5.833) and her lowest in student behaviors (5.333). Tia spoke positively of her experiences as a student at the school, as well as of the unique community and learning experience the school provides current students. Her discussion of students, however, suggested what she perceives as cultural challenges and an undervaluing of education.
Prompt: Please describe how you feel about living and learning in a rural community. “Well, it definitely gives you a unique perspective and experience,” commented Tia, who spoke highly of her rural experience and the opportunities she had in the school. She explained that while there was a great deal she didn’t understand or had not experienced when she went to college because “there is a lot that bigger schools offer that rural schools do not,” she said she felt she had brought experiences and understandings that kids from larger schools could not. She noted that people she met at college had not experienced the same level of school community involvement in their larger schools because of the higher number of students, citing her ability to simultaneously serve as class president and Fellowship of Christian Athletes president, as well as play three varsity sports, as evidence of that involvement. “Kids in big schools were just not as involved in things as we were here,” said Tia. “I got to be more involved and do more things here because of our lower numbers… At a bigger school they couldn’t do that.” She further noted that being that involved in high school helped her develop leadership skills and a greater understanding of community that she said those from larger schools lacked. “I realized I could bring stuff to the table that other kids couldn’t because of my experiences here.”

Prompt: How do you think your students feel about living and learning in a rural community? When asked about how her students felt about their rural experience, Tia stated that most students probably see themselves as disadvantaged and think a school with more people and opportunities would be better, especially since social media has made certain things more visible in recent years, but she noted that students here get a greater sense of community and closeness, which she sees as an asset. “I think the
students think that [being from Belkin] is kind of a disadvantage. They think bigger is better,” said Tia. “And sure, we don’t always have the opportunities and diversity of a larger school, but they’re getting something unique here. Can it be a disadvantage? Yeah, I guess it can be sometimes, but they’re getting something here that they can’t get at other places. But they probably see it as a disadvantage.”

**Prompt: How would you describe the relationship between rural communities and broader society?** Tia commented that the relationship between rural communities and broader society is not a good relationship and discussed how beliefs and diversity in rural communities are quite different than broader society. She noted the typically homogenously conservative views and ways of living in the rural community and stated those who leave the community often experience some culture shock upon leaving, repeating the phrase “it’s a whole other world out there” several times. “I would say, it’s not a great relationship between the two just because the kids don’t get to experience a lot of things here that prepare them for life outside of here,” explained Tia. “If they stay here, they’re probably fine, but if they go out there, they’ve got a lot to learn.” Tia elaborated, citing her own college experiences. “Like even with going to college, and I just went to Muskingum which is less than an hour away, and it was a whole different world for me. There was a lot more diversity than there is here. If they stay here it’s good, but if they go out then they have a lot to learn. It’s a broader picture.”

When asked to elaborate on the idea of a broader picture, she focused on diversity, which she defined as “people’s different opinions and perspectives—there’s just a lot more going on out there.” “There were so many things I experienced and things I saw that are a
lot more liberal than what I experienced here,” continued Tia. “There’s just a lot out there I didn’t even know was going on…People are conservative here.”

Prompt: In your opinion, how does this relationship relate to education?

When asked about how this relationship connects to education, Tia explained that teachers and the school try to help students broaden their understandings and let them know there is more than what they see in their community and said this has gotten somewhat easier with social media. She added, however, that often students lack the life experience to contextualize or fully understand what they see online, a characteristic she attributed to Belkin being a generational community. “Most parents grew up here, and if not, they grew up rural, so the experiences they share with students are limited,” explained Tia. “They’re not getting exposed to much at home… Obviously we try to broaden their horizons, try to help them realize there’s life outside of here, but I wouldn’t say I’m very well versed in what’s going on in the world either. I grew up here, went to school here, and came back here, so I don’t always know what all is going on in the world out there.”

Prompt: Where do you see your students in the future? Tia expressed that she anticipates most students will stay in the community and expects few to pursue college or vocational training. She returned to the idea of generational influence and noted that most don’t really know “what’s out there” and do little to explore their options. She emphasized a lack of awareness regarding options, as well as the low value families place on education, which she said limits what they see as possible. “I see a lot of them not leaving here,” said Tia. “Not a lot of them are going to college, and that’s the way it’s been for a while. Now a few might go to Belmont College, I think that’s still a technical
school, or the branch of Ohio University right there in St. Clairsville, and there’s nothing wrong with that. It’s a good option for some of them because it’s usually free, but not a lot of students even bother to utilize that.” She then added, “Most of them stay here, don’t work for a while, or get a minimum wage job and try to find something they can stay at, or they job hop.”

**Prompt: What impact do you believe you have on these outcomes?** Tia said she believes she has some impact on student outcomes and returned to the concept of teachers “broadening horizons,” but she added that this influence is limited by students’ lack of awareness and a cultural tendency not to value education. “I believe I have some impact on them, but I think a lot of times though their mind is already made up, or they feel like they don’t have the opportunity to do something else.” She said students “don’t see” possibilities, particularly as they relate to school. “A lot of people around here don’t place a very high value on education,” explained Tia, “and because the kids have never been taught that— and I personally believe that that is something that you have to be taught. That’s a value that your parents have and pass on to you, that value on education. And I don’t think a lot of parents around here do place value on education, so they just feel like that’s not what they want or it’s not worth the effort. They’re just here to get done.”

When asked how teachers might improve their impact, she suggested career and technical education, but then remarked that although those opportunities already exist for students, the low value placed on education at home often contributes to students not taking advantage of them. “I think a lot would benefit from going into a trade, but a lot of them don’t even want to do that,” said Tia. “They’re sitting here junior and senior year,
and it’s supposed to be college prep, but they’re not going to college, so they’re not really engaged in it, but they’re also not getting the skills they need to do something else. It’s kind of a waste.”

**Identified patterns in Tia’s responses.** Within Tia’s interview several patterns emerged. Rural strengths centered on community and smallness were among these, as were her own positive experiences in the rural community. Other patterns included the concept of “out there” and references to awareness, seeing, and not seeing. Similar to other participants, discussions of students produced some deficit-oriented patterns, particularly in reference to the role of families in students’ perceptions of and attitudes towards education. Again, a lack of awareness, a failure to value education, and low expectations were repeated points. Additionally, Tia made repeated references to broader society being “a whole other world,” creating a clear distinction between the rural community and broader society. Other recurring points included students not leaving the community and seeing herself as having a limited impact, which she attributed to familial influences, findings that seem to align to Tia’s efficacy data in which she reported a greater sense of efficacy in areas related to instruction that she in domains related to student and family engagement and behaviors.

**Shae**

Shae is a 43-year-old female, who has been working at the school as a full-time intervention specialist for the last six years; however, she worked as an aid and substitute for several years prior to working in her current capacity. Shae’s reported efficacy data included a 7.16 overall rating on the *Teacher’s Sense of Teacher Efficacy* survey, with her highest self-rating in the area of classroom management (7.25) and her lowest in instruction (7). Her rating on the *Collective Teacher Efficacy Scale* was a 5.833 overall,
with her highest rating in the area of instruction (6.667) and her lowest in student behaviors (5.333). Shae spoke quite positively about rural communities and her ability to work within one, expressing a preference for the community’s smallness and disconnection from broader society and suggesting numerous educational benefits, particularly for special education students.

Prompt: Please describe how you feel about living and learning in a rural community. When asked about her experiences within the rural community, Shae noted that she has always enjoyed the smallness of the rural community and the individualized care that is often available in this context, noting that those not familiar with the rural experience often do not understand what it has to offer. “I like it a lot,” said Shae. “I like being in a small community. I like that it’s small and everyone is so involved and knows each other and looks out for each other. She noted that this involvement and care extends to education. “…learning here, I liked that too. It was a small school, my teachers cared about me and would help me with anything,” said Shae. “I think some people think you don’t get as much, you know, but I never really struggled outside of here. I went to college and did well, so I think I got what I needed in a rural school. Also, like a lot of my kids, I know I feel like the experience here is easier in some ways because we are small and you can go to teachers and get what you need and people help. And I don’t know that it’s always like that in bigger areas. I never really wanted bigger. But I’m from here.”

Prompt: How do you think your students feel about living and learning in a rural community? “I think most students like learning in a small rural school. Especially, my students,” said Shae. “I think it's super helpful to them. They have a lot of
support. They get to be in different classes, and if they are having trouble the teachers are really good about adjusting and working with them. And the kids know them and what to expect and are understanding. We don’t really have many issues with bullying or including them.” When asked to elaborate Shae explained that because her students are high-needs, they often struggle in school, so the smaller setting is particularly helpful. “They're not typical students in some ways, so I think the smaller setting helps. They get a lot more one-on-one, and they do a lot better with their peers. I think it’s super important that they have that. We’ve never really had any issues with inclusion here. The teachers and students here know them and know what to expect from them and how to interact with them. They don’t always get that at bigger schools.”

Shae explained that she did some of her student teaching in a more urban setting and immediately noticed differences in inclusion and treatment of SPED students in urban settings as compared to what this population receives in rural settings. She said that in her preservice training, a lot of special education students were “not included in regular classes,” and therefore, didn’t have the same opportunities to interact with peers and teachers that students do at Belkin.

“There just wasn’t as much of that,” said Shae, “and when there was there could be issues.”

Prompt: How would you describe the relationship between rural communities and broader society? When asked about the relationship between rural communities and broader society, Shae chuckled and explained that she pays limited attention to what is happening outside the local area. “We’re a little detached from broader society. I just live in my little world. I don't really get too involved outside of
here,” said Shae. “I pay attention to local news and what is happening in the community, but other stuff, I just leave it alone. I don't really think about the outside world or pay a lot of attention to news and stuff outside of the area. And I think that's kind of the norm around here.” She described this ability to detach from broader society as one of the “nice” things about a small rural community, adding that the community’s perceived and geographical isolation makes it possible to get by without much interaction or knowledge of happenings elsewhere. “It’s so far from where we are at that you don’t really have to worry about the outside world. You can pay attention to what’s happening around here, and you don’t really have to pay attention to everything on the national news,” said Shae. “I watch CNN [10] with the students in class, but that’s about it. I could probably do better in that area. But honestly, we can get away with staying in our bubble.”

Prompt: In your opinion, how does this relationship relate to education?

Shae noted that this staying in the “bubble” likely affects some aspects of education and may pose a challenge for those who leave the community. She described a lack of awareness and interest in outside events as a common characteristic across the community, but said this is probably a weakness as it relates to education because students would “probably benefit” from a more exposure to what goes on in other places and more knowledge about the world outside of the community. She mentioned that while her own children, who both attended the school and grew up in the community, have done well as adults and have been successful overall in college, they faced some challenges in this area. “They’ve been okay overall, so they got a good education here,” said Shae, “but they struggled with history in college because they weren’t exposed to as much of that here. They didn’t know much about politics and world events, and their
college classes in those areas were more challenging… We could do a better job at that.” Shae then noted that she does try to bring some outside awareness into her classroom by utilizing CNN 10 and doing some community awareness projects, but added that this is still somewhat limited and not something she considers a personal strength. “I feel like I could do a lot more. Because I'm like this and I don’t always pay attention to what’s going on outside here, but we do try. We've been doing a little more with that lately, with CNN and things,” explained Shae, “but I feel like it's not really enough. It’s a weakness. So I think we could do more. I think it would be good for them to step outside their comfort zone.”

**Prompt: Where do you see your students in the future?** Shae explained that for many of her students, graduating high school is a challenge, so she tries to emphasize workforce opportunities. “I see my students in the workforce somewhere. We really focus on that,” said Shae. “We want them to be successful, and we do a lot to find places where they can be successful… And even after they graduate, we try to support them in that. We welcome them to come back and get help if they need it, let us know if they need anything and how they’re doing, and some do.”

**Prompt: What impact do you believe you have on these outcomes?** When asked about her impact on students, Shae stated that she saw herself as having a significant impact on student outcomes, especially since many of her students might not graduate otherwise. She referenced two students in particular, one who stopped coming to school that she helped get back to attending regularly by making home visits and bringing him to school, and another who ultimately dropped out, but who switched schools before doing so because he didn’t want to disappoint her. She noted the willingness of small
school teachers to intervene in ways that might not be as common in more urban settings, including calling and visiting home, bringing kids to school, and being more involved in general. “I think I have a big impact. My students are not, well a lot these kids don’t graduate,” said Shae. “You don't know what all they’re dealing with at home, and sometimes mom and dad or grandparents didn’t finish school, so there’s not that push. I've had two like that recently. I had one, he actually left so he could drop out… He knew when he was 18 he was dropping out. His dad didn’t graduate, his mom didn’t graduate. They just didn’t have that emphasis on education, but we’d gotten close and he didn’t want to disappoint me, so he left so he could quit without seeing me. I saw him and he said, “I couldn’t look at you and drop out so I had to leave.” So I think I have a big impact on them.” Shae explained that this type of relationship is common in her position and in rural communities. “If they stop coming, I’ll go get them. I’ll call home or visit home. I’ll get them here and do my best to get them to graduate,” she said. “One student not too long ago just quit coming, so I went to his house and woke him up and brought him to school. And it worked out. He’s coming again, and he’s glad I made him… I love them and that has an impact.”

As we finished the interview Shae said she wants people to know that rural schools can be amazing places because of the closeness of the community and what teachers are able to do for students who might “slip through the cracks” elsewhere. “I love it here, and I love my kids. We know each other and know our students and families, and you don’t always see that. People don’t always realize just what teachers do. And all the people that like come back, you know? I don't think you see that at a bigger school. I
think that’s something kind of unique to here. And I don’t think people always realize that.”

**Identified patterns in Shae’s responses.** Several patterns emerged within Shae’s responses. Among these was a repeated emphasis on the positive aspects of a close-knit community and relationships within that context. She also made multiple references to the inclusiveness of rural schools and the strength of small, frequently noting that small empowers her to have an impact. Like other participants, Shae repeatedly referenced the rural community’s disconnect from broader society, employing similar here versus “out there” language. She also made some mention of families and their limited emphasis on education, but this point was not given the same emphasis as in other interviews. One of the most noticeable features of her responses was her emphasis on love and the ability to give to and impact students. These findings would seem to align with Shae’s efficacy perceptions, as she was one the only participant to report student behaviors and engagement as a perceived strength.

**Tom**

Tom is a 56-year-old male who graduated from Belkin and has been teaching there for more than 20 years. Tom’s reported efficacy data included a 7.042 overall rating on the *Teacher’s Sense of Teacher Efficacy* survey, with his highest self-rating in the area of classroom management (7.625) and his lowest in student engagement (6.75). His rating on the *Collective Teacher Efficacy Scale* was 8.167 overall, with equal ratings across instructional and behavioral domains. Tom generally spoke positively about rural communities and expressed a belief that rural schools provide a strong education. He noted benefits to the smaller size of the school and the community, particularly the
relationships that are built in these space and expressed a belief in the abilities of his colleagues and dedication of teachers in the building to provide a quality education.

Prompt: Please describe how you feel about living and learning in a rural community. When asked about his own experiences living and learning rurally, Tom spoke to a positive experience, commenting on the closeness of the community, the relationships between neighbors and community members, and how this closeness extends into most aspect of rural living, including schools. “I honestly like it,” said Tom. “It’s small, but it’s where I’m comfortable. Obviously, if I wanted to be somewhere else I could have been, but I like it here. I like the community and the closeness. I think it’s a good thing.”

Prompt: How do you think your students feel about living and learning in a rural community? Regarding students’ perceptions of rurality, Tom stated he believes most students enjoy the small school setting and that it provides support to them that they would not get elsewhere. He noted that some attitudes towards the rural school and community have changed “with cellphones and social media,” as students now have greater exposure to “the world outside,” but added that most likely don’t know enough beyond what they see on internet to truly gauge their situation. “I think when it comes down to it, they like it,” said Tom, “but I think there’s enough information available on what’s going on out in the world, with social media and everything, that they wonder. They see everything going on out in the world and maybe come to think that’s for them, but they’ll probably have some realizations if they get out there.” He further explained that he thinks the nature of social media causes many students have a skewed perception of the world outside Belkin. “I always tell them don’t believe everything you see on the
internet because it isn’t always what you think. It isn’t all good out there. A lot of it is bad… I think for the most part though, the kids enjoy the smaller environment and the closeness of the school and community.”

Prompt: How would you describe the relationship between rural communities and broader society? When asked about the community’s relationship with broader society, Tom noted the safety and familiarity of the smaller community and that it is in many ways protected from some of the issues and influences of broader society. Although he acknowledged that there are some problems in the rural community, he suggested that despite these issues, he sees students as being somewhat naïve to the “outside world” and lacking awareness of “out there.” “Well, like I said before, I think there’s a lot of things we don’t really have to worry about here. I don't think it’s quite like it is really out there in the real world. It is different,” said Tom. “Obviously we have some problems with stuff, you know, like drugs and alcohol, probably, and that’s an issue we have to deal with because they’re children… but there’s just not a lot of things they would have to see or deal with like out in the real world.”

Prompt: In your opinion, how does this relationship relate to education? When asked how this relationship relates to education, Tom said he believes students get a solid education regardless of their rurality and noted the passion and commitment of teachers at the school. He added, however, that he felt there have been greater challenges since the location of school was moved from the center of town. “I think that they’re, hopefully they're getting, no, I mean, I know they're getting a good education here. We have some great teachers, some people who are passionate about what they do,” said Tom. “You know, it's just that I don’t think we have the same pride and sense of
community that we used to since we moved. I think that pride really took a hit. The school brought our community together. I think it's different from where we were to where we are now. I think, I just don't think we're as close as what we used to be.” When asked to elaborate on this, Tom connected his concerns back to the benefits of community and closeness. “The move put us outside the community. I think that was a big deal because I think our, you know, our pride took a hit,” explained Tom. “We used to be right there in the community. We were close, and there was a lot of history.”

Tom then went on to explain that he believes the move and the resulting shift in the relationship between school and community has impacted students’ understanding of the community, but added he believes they also have misunderstandings about broader society. He returned to the misleading nature of social media and the fact that kids “think they know” when they do not. “Getting out into the real world is a big change for a lot of them. Where we are right now, we don’t really have a lot of the things they see and think about or think they want,” said Tom. “We don’t have those things other than on social media, and I think it’s very different for them once they get out into the real world and realize everything isn’t just handed to them. They’ll have to work for things.”

Prompt: Where do you see your students in the future? “Well, I hope to see them achieving everything that they want to do,” said Tom, noting this will be different for different students. “You know, obviously I want to see them doing the best they can do and achieving their dreams. I think that's one thing— and I'm not saying it doesn't happen in urban areas— but in rural areas we are close to our kids and we can support them in that. They can come back, and we see a lot of that-- I remember when you did this. Help me with that.” Tom added, however, that he believes this is largely dependent
on the students themselves and what they are willing to do to realize their goals. “I mean, obviously they’re going to get what they put into it. And that can be an issue because they don’t always worry about grades or see school as important,” explained Tom. “Sometimes they don’t care, or mom and dad don’t put as much emphasis on that… but I'm a firm believer that you get out of something what you put into it.” Tom stated that teachers in the school go “above and beyond” to support students, but it is up to students to “do something with it.” “They have to realize it’s not going to be as easy when they get into the real world,” said Tom. “They’re going to have to work for it… but I want to see them get as far as they can.”

Prompt: What impact do you believe you have on these outcomes? When asked about his impact on student outcomes, Tom expressed a belief in his ability to positively impact students. “Obviously, we’re a huge influence,” said Tom, “because we’re the ones who are here with them, who encourage them and tell them about the world and what’s out there.” He said students ultimately have to work for their goals, but explained teachers in the school play an important role in supporting students. “We can do a lot for the kids and we do—we all have,” said Tom. “We all would because we just want for them to work hard to be the best they can be and know that we're here to support them, and if they need anything, we’re here to help them in any way we can.”

Identified patterns in Tom’s responses. Several patterns were identified within Tom’s interview responses. Like other participants, Tom spoke repeatedly to the closeness of rural schools/communities and the ability to leverage relationships within these contexts. He also expressed positive attitudes towards rural schools more generally and, like Robert and Shae, frustrations with negative perceptions of rurality. Tom, like
Robert, placed significant emphasis on students as the locus of control, making multiple references to students getting “what they put into it”—a pattern that may provide some insight into Tom’s reported efficacy perceptions, as he seems to distinguish between his own ability and influence and student outcomes. Additionally, Tom made clear distinctions between rural communities and broader society, utilizing the phrases “world out there” and “the real world” frequently, at times depicting that other world as negative or threatening. Other observations included multiple references to valuing education, the impact of social media, students’ lack of awareness, and the school as a community hub.

**Identified Patterns Across Participants**

In reviewing individual transcripts individual patterns emerged, but as noted by Saldaña, (2021), second cycle coding provides for a more formal thematic analysis and the identification of trends in participants’ perceptions. Pattern coding across participants was employed as part of the second cycle coding process to help further categorize and consolidate data. This process revealed several patterns consistent across participants. Patterns tracked were those that appeared in the responses of three or more participants. These commonalities were found across participants within individual questions, as well as across questions. Findings are organized by question with discussion of patterns across questions in the sections that follow.

**Prompt: Please Describe How You Feel About Living and Learning in a Rural Community**

Each of the participants spoke positively of their own experiences living and learning in a rural community and expressed a preference for the smallness of the community and the relationships fostered in the rural context. Most participants also
spoke to a belief that these relationships and closeness were unique to the rural experience, but also acknowledged a lack of experience with and/or little interest in living in larger communities. Patterns identified within participants’ responses are presented in figure 11.

**Figure 11**

*Patterns Across Responses to the Prompt “Please Describe How You Feel About Living and Learning in a Rural Community.”*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pattern</th>
<th>Participants</th>
</tr>
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</table>
| Closeness/ Relationships        | Betsy - close relationships  
                                 | - accountable to each other  
                                 | Kyla - everyone knows each other and looks out for each other  
                                 | Robert - community is a little more close-knit…pulls together to help each other  
                                 | Tia - better understanding of community  
                                 | Shae - it’s small and everyone is so involved and knows each other and looks out for each other  
                                 | Tom - I like the community and the closeness. I think it’s a good thing.  
| Educational Advantages of Small | Kyla - teachers knew me and my family and wanted me to do well.  
                                 | Robert - better understanding of and more focused attention on students’ needs  
                                 | Tia - got to be more involved and do more things here because of our lower numbers  
                                 | Shae - easier in some ways because we are small and you can go to teachers and get what you need and people help  
<pre><code>                             | Tom -                                                                                     |
</code></pre>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Here vs. There</th>
<th>Betsy</th>
<th>Robert</th>
<th>Tia</th>
<th>Shae</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- more one on one experience</td>
<td>- Closer relationships here</td>
<td>- less exposure to the outside world and maybe certain experiences</td>
<td>- a lot that bigger schools offer that rural schools do not</td>
<td>- I don’t know that it’s always like that in bigger areas. I never really wanted bigger</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- fly under the radar</td>
<td>- not accountable to some of the policies and issues that people at the top try to push</td>
<td>- kids in big schools were just not as involved in things as we were here</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Each identified pattern is presented on the left with examples of participant responses evidencing this pattern. Not all qualifying responses were included in these examples.

**Prompt: How Do You Think Your Students Feel About Living and Learning in a Rural Community**

Participants had varied responses to students’ perceptions of living and learning in a rural context, but within the diversity of responses, some consistencies did emerge. The first of these was a lack of awareness. Most participants noted referenced the rural community as being all students know and commented on students lacking knowledge of the “outside” world. While some participants described this lack of awareness as a limitation for student aspirations, others suggested it may contribute to students underestimating the quality of their current experience. In both instances, however, there was an observable emphasis on students not knowing. In addition, most participants noted a belief that students benefit from the smallness of the rural experience and the relationships within the small community, although their perceptions of students’
awareness of this benefit were varied. Another observed pattern was participants
referencing generational patterns and families’ beliefs about rurality, a pattern that was
observed across participants and questions. Interestingly, within each of these conceptual
patterns a language pattern also emerged across participants—the phrase “out there” to
distinguish the rural community from broader society. Identified patterns are presented in
figure 12.

**Figure 12**

*Patterns Across Responses to the Prompt “How Do You Think Your Students Feel About Living and Learning in a Rural Community?”*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pattern</th>
<th>Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lack of Awareness/ All They Know</td>
<td>Betsy: all they know… don’t know what else is out there</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Kyla: not sure they think about it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Robert: this is all they know, except what they might hear</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tia: This is all they know</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tom: probably have some realizations if they get out there</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deficit Perceptions</td>
<td>Robert: thinking there might be more opportunities at a bigger school or thinking they can get a better education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tia: See it as kind of a disadvantage. They think bigger is better</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tom: some attitudes towards the rural school and community have changed wonder if [out there] is for them</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limited Aspirations</td>
<td>Betsy: don’t aspire to much else</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Kyla: just accept it</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
- kids don’t care about going anywhere else
- a lot aren’t even thinking about it

**Relationships**

Robert
- Benefit from the tight-knit community
- kids benefit from the fact that we’re smaller, and I think they know that

Tia
- Getting something unique here

Shae
- a lot more one-on-one, and they do a lot better with their peers.

Tom
- enjoy the smaller environment and the closeness of the school and community

**Familial Influences**

Betsy
- they aren’t thinking about it or having conversations about it at home

Kyla
- parents never wanted more
- kids of parents who didn’t want anything else, so the kids don’t care about going anywhere else

Tia
- starts at home

*Note.* Each identified pattern is presented on the left with examples of participant responses evidencing this pattern. Not all qualifying responses were included in these examples.

**Prompt: How Would You Describe the Relationship Between Rural Communities and Broader Society**

When speaking of the relationship between rural communities and broader society, most participants spoke to a lack of relationship or a distant relationship in which tensions emerged. All expressed a sort of safety in rural communities that suggested they saw themselves as somewhat self-contained and able to function separately from broader society, and most elaborated on this idea by noting what is and is not seen in rural
communities. For some the unseen related to opportunities and possibilities, but for others, the unseen was more ominous and suggested a sort of protection in rurality. Multiple participants noted the ability to focus on what is geographically close, and some commented that this is part of the appeal of rurality to some rural community members, including themselves. Interestingly, the concept of familial influence emerged in some responses as contributing to this relationship, particularly as it relates to awareness of broader society. This familial focus, however, was not a dominant pattern in response to this question, but is one noted across questions. Patterns identified in response to this prompt are presented in figure 13.

**Figure 13**

*Patterns Across Responses to the Prompt “How Would You Describe the Relationship Between Rural Communities and Broader Society?”*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pattern</th>
<th>Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lack of Relationship</td>
<td>Betsy - there is no relationship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Kyla - I don’t know that there is much of one</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Robert - at a distance...separate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tia - not a great relationship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- it’s a whole other world out there</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Shae - a little detached from broader society. I just live in my little world</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural Communities as Self-Contained</td>
<td>Betsy - not exposed to broader society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Kyla - focus on what is familiar and in their own community because they can</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- lack of awareness often affects attitudes towards school and where they see themselves in the future</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Robert - exists outside of broader society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>In/Visibility</strong></td>
<td><strong>Families/Generational Patterns</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tia</td>
<td>Betsy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- the kids don’t get to experience a lot of things here that prepare them for life outside of here… if they stay here, they’re probably fine.</td>
<td>- they don’t see much outside of here</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shae</td>
<td>- don’t really get too involved outside of here… I just leave it alone.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- I don't really think about the outside world or pay a lot of attention to news and stuff outside of the area</td>
<td>- these kids exist in a tunnel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tom</td>
<td>- safe here… protected from broader society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- a lot of things we don’t really have to worry about here…don't think it’s quite like it is really out there in the real world</td>
<td>- lack of awareness about life outside the rural community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- don’t see it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Betsy</td>
<td>Kyla</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- don’t always see or even need to see what else is out there</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- people outside rural communities don’t see what we have to offer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kyla</td>
<td>Tia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- a lot I didn’t see here</td>
<td>- a lot out there I didn’t even know was going on</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shae</td>
<td>Tom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- It’s so far from where we are at that you don’t really have to worry about the outside world</td>
<td>- students are naïve to the outside world and lack awareness of what’s out there</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- we can get away with staying in our bubble</td>
<td>- there’s just not a lot of things they would have to see or deal with like out in the real world</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robert</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Their parents grew up here; their grandparents grew up here, and they don’t really go any further than this.

Kyla - All their families know so it’s all they know.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Patterns</th>
<th>Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Protections</td>
<td>Betsy</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Each identified pattern is presented on the left with examples of participant responses evidencing this pattern. Not all qualifying responses were included in these examples.

Prompt: How Does This Relationship Relate to Education

When speaking of how rural communities’ relationship with broader society relates to education, participants’ responses included both positive and negative perceptions of this relationship. In terms of positive dynamics, several participants spoke to the protections afforded by geographic distance, suggesting that rurality enabled a greater focus on community, as well as insulation from national trends that some participants saw as potentially negative influences. The limitations of this dynamic, however, seemed to center on a lack of awareness and limited visibility—both in terms of rural communities’ awareness of broader society and of broader society’s awareness of rural communities—with most participants describing a disconnect that could be challenging for students who might want to leave the community. Additionally, multiple participants referenced that this lack of awareness contributes to educational disengagement and a lowered value placed on education, a point that for several participants, segued into discussions of familial and generational perceptions of education. These patterns are presented in figure 14.

Figure 14

Patterns Across Responses to the Prompt “How Does this Relationship Relate to Education?”
| Limitations | Betsy | - I don’t know that education really matters to them because they don’t know what’s out there  
| Kyla | - Students disinterested because it doesn’t relate to them  
| Robert | - Affects perceptions of rural schools, they think bigger is better  
| Shae | - Money talks and rural areas can’t always compete  
| Tom | - Students would benefit from more exposure to what happens outside their community  
| | - Challenging for those who leave  
| | - misunderstandings about broader society  
| Tom | - Getting out into the real world is a big change for a lot of them  

| Awareness/Visibility | Betsy | - They don’t know what’s out there  
| Kyla | - Ask them to think about work and it’s just a list of things that they know from here. They don’t know that there's other things  
| Robert | - They don’t see this stuff, so they're not going to have an interest in school  
| | - Don’t know what it’s really like out there  

- lack of relationship can distance rural schools from national trends and policy (specified religious and gender issues as examples)
- supportive relationships
- not caught up in the hustle and bustle
- slower pace
- common to focus on your own community
- community
- I don’t know that education really matters to them because they don’t know what’s out there
- Students disinterested because it doesn’t relate to them
- Affects perceptions of rural schools, they think bigger is better
- Money talks and rural areas can’t always compete
- Students would benefit from more exposure to what happens outside their community
- Challenging for those who leave
- misunderstandings about broader society
- Getting out into the real world is a big change for a lot of them
- They don’t know what’s out there
- Ask them to think about work and it’s just a list of things that they know from here. They don’t know that there's other things
- They don’t see this stuff, so they're not going to have an interest in school
- Don’t know what it’s really like out there
- People from other places don’t see what we have here either
Tia
- we try to broaden their horizons, try to help them realize there’s life outside of here, but I wouldn’t say I’m very well versed in what’s going on in the world either
Tom
- they think they know, when they don’t

**Familial/ Generational Influences**

- Families don’t value education.
Betsy
- The families started here and stay here, and that’s all they know
Kyla
- there aren’t many who want to do well in school who want to go get a cool job that makes them money because their parents don't have that
Tia
- Most parents grew up here and if not they grew up rural, so the experiences they share with students are limited

**Effort**

- you get out of it what you put into it
Robert
- everything isn’t just handed to them. They’ll have to work for things.
Tom

*Note.* Each identified pattern is presented on the left with examples of participant responses evidencing this pattern. Not all qualifying responses were included in these examples.

**Prompt: Where Do You See Your Students in the Future**

Participants’ responses regarding student outcomes centered on not leaving the rural community, with all but one participant noting that most students will remain in the community. Of particular interest, however, were the tensions that emerged in this prediction. Multiple participants framed remaining local as a negative outcome and connected these outcomes to students’ lack of awareness or the lack of visible options in the community, familial and generational influences, a lack of aspiration, and/or a lack
work ethic, with college outside the area emerging as a primary conception of success. Some participants also noted possibilities within the local workforce, but few framed this as success for students. Robert, for instance, suggested this was a positive outcome for the community because the community needs workers but said little on what it meant for students. Shae, however, was an outlier in her celebration of local employment, noting entering the local workforce would allow students to sustain themselves while staying close to their established support systems, specifically those formed in the school.

**Figure 15**

*Patterns Across Responses to the Prompt “Where Do You See Your Students in the Future?”*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Patterns</th>
<th>Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Here vs. There</td>
<td>Betsy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I see my students in this county.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>There’s these limits they’ve imposed on themselves</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Kyla</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Most won’t leave this town</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Robert</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A lot them will stay here. Most of them stay here</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>… that’s good because we need laborers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I see a lot of them not leaving here. Not a lot of them are going to college, and that’s the way it’s been for a while</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Shae</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I see my students in the workforce somewhere [locally]. We really focus on that. We want them to be successful, and we do a lot to find places where they can be successful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Awareness</td>
<td>Betsy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>they don’t know what else is out there</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Kyla</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>This is what they know.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Tia</strong></td>
<td>don’t really know what’s out there and don’t do much to explore their options</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Aspirations</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Betsy</strong></td>
<td>self-imposed limitations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Kyla</strong></td>
<td>We don’t have many kids who want to do well or who want to work for that awesome job</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Tia</strong></td>
<td>low value families place on education and that limits what they think they can do</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Familial/Generational Influence</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Betsy</strong></td>
<td>that’s generational… has to do with their background—no value of education, no support, no goals for the future. Education is not important</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Kyla</strong></td>
<td>We don’t have many kids who want to do well or who want to work for that awesome job because their parents don’t… Most will just end up getting a job close by doing whatever</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Tia</strong></td>
<td>low value families place on education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Tom</strong></td>
<td>Sometimes they don’t care, or mom and dad don’t put as much emphasis on that… but I’m a firm believer that you get out of something what you put into it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Effort</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Betsy</strong></td>
<td>no goals for the future</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Kyla</strong></td>
<td>want to do well or who want to work for that awesome job</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Robert</strong></td>
<td>get what you put into it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Tom</strong></td>
<td>they’re going to get what they put into it, and that can be an issue because they don’t always worry about grades or see school as important</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Note. Each identified pattern is presented on the left with examples of participant responses evidencing this pattern. Not all qualifying responses were included in these examples.

**Prompt: What Impact Do You Believe You Have on These Outcomes**

Within discussions of impact, participants expressed varied beliefs regarding their potential influence on student outcomes. Although some conveyed a limited belief in their ability to affect student outcomes— for instance, Betsy, who stated she does not “feel like education can impact” students— others, such as Kyla, focused on a potential for significant impact that was often thwarted by external variables. Impact was often described in terms of relationships with students and colleagues, ability to support and encourage students, and opportunities to increase awareness, but influence was consistently presented with the caveat of working against familial/generational influences, lack of awareness and aspirations, and poor effort. Of those who expressed a clear belief in their ability to impact, only Shae maintained her belief in her positive influence despite external variables. Patterns identified in participants’ discussion of impact are presented in figure 16.

**Figure 16**

*Patterns Across Responses to the Prompt “What Impact Do You Believe You Have on These Outcomes?”*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pattern</th>
<th>Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Minimal Impact</td>
<td>Betsy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- very little</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- I just don’t feel like education can impact</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Kyla</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- I want to encourage them and teach them as much as I can, but I know a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>lot of them just don’t care. They don’t see education as valuable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Robert</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Significant Impact</strong></td>
<td><strong>Kyla</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------</td>
<td>---------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Background makes a difference</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Only going to get out of it what they put into it</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- I have some impact on them, but I think a lot of times though their mind is already made up, or they feel like they don’t have the opportunity to do something else</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Robert</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- Those who want to go do something with their life, I want to be an encouragement. I'd love to be able to be supportive and teach them as much as I can</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Rural teachers may have a greater influence than teachers elsewhere because of small class sizes and their ability to get on those kid’s that don’t want to put forth effort.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Tia</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- We help broaden horizons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Shae</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- I have a big impact</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Tom</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Obviously, we’re a huge influence because we’re the ones who are here with them, who encourage them and tell them about the world and what’s out there</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Relationships</strong></th>
<th><strong>Robert</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- We know them and can keep on them</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Shae</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- If they stop coming, I’ll go get them. I’ll call home or visit home. I’ll get them here and do my best to get them to graduate</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- I love them and that has an impact</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- We know each other and know our students and families</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Tom</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- We're here to support them, and if they need anything, we’re here to help them in any way we can</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Awareness</strong></th>
<th><strong>Betsy</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- Most don’t have any idea what’s out there</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Kyla</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Tia | a lot of students don’t want that, and they don’t know that there’s other jobs out there
|     | lack of visibility
|     | students don’t see possibilities

| Aspirations | Betsy | There’s no goal setting
| Kyla | They know high school and they know that they need to do that, but that's about it.
| Tia | I think a lot would benefit from going into a trade, but a lot of them don’t even want to do that
| Tom | Students have to have goals

| Familial Generational Influences | Betsy | Horrible backgrounds
| Kyla | Not getting that at home
| Robert | More impact on kids who come up like I did with families who promote education
| Tia | Not all students and families value education in the same way and that can influence how much difference a teacher can make
| Shae | That’s a value that your parents have and pass on to you, that value on education. And I don’t think a lot of parents around here do place value on education, so they just feel like that’s not what they want or it’s not worth the effort. They’re just here to get done.
|     | His dad didn’t graduate, his mom didn’t graduate. They just didn’t have that emphasis on education…
Effort

Betsy
- have to have that internal drive to succeed beyond what society says they should, and most don’t have it must try to succeed

Robert
- whatever you put into it is what you get out of it

Tom
- students have to have goals and work for them
- going to get what they put into it

Note. Each identified pattern is presented on the left with examples of participant responses evidencing this pattern. Not all qualifying responses were included in these examples.

Identified Patterns Across Questions

The examination of patterns across participants’ responses to individual questions revealed several patterns across these prompts as well. Relationships within rural schools and communities was among these, as participants referenced the closeness of rural communities and the ability to foster relationships in reference to their own experiences living and learning in rural communities, as well those of their students. Community and relationships were also referenced by the majority of participants when discussing student outcomes and their ability to influence these outcomes. However, equally pervasive was conceptualization of broader society as “out there,” with all participants regularly utilizing this language and creating a clear distinction between broader society and the rural community. This pattern initially emerged in reference to students’ perceptions of rurality but was prominent across all questions that followed. Perhaps related to this conception of “out there,” was a here (rural) versus there (broader society) pattern that seemed prevalent throughout the interviews. This comparative tension surfaced in reference to personal experiences, relationships within the community, quality of
education, student and familial awareness, opportunities and possibilities, and participants’ conceptions of student success. Other patterns across questions included participants’ repeated references to students’, families’, and their own lack of awareness; the perceived influence of familial and generational values; and a belief that effort drives success.

**Identified Patterns Within the Focus Group**

These patterns identified within individual interviews were further evidenced in the transcripts from the focus group. For instance, strength in community and strong relationships were focal points of the loosely structured discussion, but within this discussion was also evidence of the previously noted here versus there pattern, as the rural experience was often framed in comparison to non-rural contexts.

Robert:

To me it's, it's more of a family setting instead of, you know just a bunch of strangers. Sometimes the kids don't know other kids in their class when they're in bigger schools and bigger settings, and like the teachers don't get to know the kids personally, which I feel that it's more of a family and personal.

Betsy:

I was just going to say everybody's related. I'm not, I'm a little bit of an outsider. I'm one town over, but everybody in this building is related to somebody else in this building.

Shae:

Yeah, and you get a good feel for kids’ background, where they come from, what their home life's like, you know. And if you were in a bigger setting, I feel like
you wouldn't get a lot of that background, and a lot of that background plays into who they are and why they're behaving the way they're behaving and what's going on with them. And I feel like, sometimes we can help them better because we know all that information.

Betsy:
It answers the why of they act like this or why they don't they act like this. Answers the why.

Robert:
Or even why they do well when in class. You know, as, as opposed to someone that doesn't do as well.

Betsy:
We’re a family here.

Shae:
I can only speculate, but I feel like whenever you're in a bigger school, just from my experience talking with Miss Emily, she came from [Park]. She felt like more of a number there to her teachers. None of them knew her personally or knew was really anything about her. She was just a number. She was overlooked. And here it's not like that. You get the more personal experience and get a lot more support and help and guidance I guess.

Additionally, aforementioned patterns related to external variables, such as familial and generational influences and students’ values and work ethic were also evidenced in the focus group discussion.
Robert:
I think you get out of it, what you put into it. The kids that want to excel and do well, they have. You know, they're looking forward to something, whether it be job wise or further education. You know, they'll put in the effort. And again, I think that relates to a lot of home life. Some of them you know, their family has not excelled. Maybe some of them have never gone to college and [the kids], they'll sometimes just say, “Well, they didn't go, so I'm not going to,” but then you know, some will say “Well, no one ever has graduated from college. I'm going to be the first one.” I've heard kids mention that before, and in a rural area, I think it's more of a workforce family type instead of higher education. But again, you know, I think that whatever you put into, it's what you're going to get out.

In addition to reinforcing patterns identified across participants within the initial interviews, the focus group data also revealed additional patterns, as focus group participants delved into more elaborative discussion. For instance, in the interviews both Tom and Tia referenced the safety and protection of rurality, noting potential dangers and difficulties that exist in other communities, but in the focus group Shae, Robert, and Betsy elaborated on this concept.

Shae:
The problems that we do have here I feel like are minimal compared to the problems that could be, and especially in a bigger setting. Like, I don't fear for my life to come here. I don't very rarely ever think about somebody shooting up the school or coming in. I just seen in Columbus outside Pataskala, a parent came in a mom and a dad and the dad was acting crazy. So they called the cops. They took
him into the principal's office and he killed himself. In the principal's office, during school. Like I don't think about those things happening here. It would be rare, I think, for it to happen here and those kind of things don't cross my mind when I come to school. I don't have all those outside outliers in my mind, I just focus on coming here and doing my job and caring about my kids, and you know, having a good day.

Robert:

We still have our behavior issues and all, you know, but not like some of the other schools you hear of-- you know bringing guns to school or fights in the school or drugs… I mean that's just different things and yeah, we still have those issues once in a while, but nothing like bigger schools out there.

Shae:

Our biggest problem are vapes and that's on the lower scale of the big picture, I feel like, yeah.

Betsy:

As far as problems go, that's not a great big thing because there’s a lot worse out there.

Similarly, both Robert and Shae noted frustration with perceptions of rural education in their initial interviews, which was a topic that also emerged in the focus group discussion, as did related discussions of course offerings, the ability to support students through more one-on-one instruction, and providing opportunities to those students who want them.

Much like the initial interview data, patterns in focus group data suggest participants value the closeness and community of the rural setting and believe these
relationships provide significant educational benefits. However, participants attributed the many of the challenges of rural education to external variables related to familial and generational influences, student effort, and public perception. Additionally, similar to the initial interview data, focus group data suggest tensions in the perception of rurality as it relates to broader society, with many of participants’ responses couched in here versus there language, that seems to distinguish rurality from broader society and speaks to conceptions of peripheralization.

**Emergent Themes**

These patterns across interviews and questions and the tensions they seemed to embody ultimately served as the foundation for identifying the study’s emergent themes. Because coding is an iterative and cyclical process, once identified the aforementioned patterns were further examined through the lens of the theoretical framework presented in Chapter 2 in order to answer the question “what does the data say?” and although the themes emerging through this analysis are simply an interpretation of the data in response to this question, the iterative passes coupled with this theoretical grounding, provided structure for refining and coding overarching categories and increased thematic reliability.

One of the most obvious themes to emerge through this process was a pervasive here versus there mentality. This theme emerged across participants when speaking of themselves, students, and conceptions of possibility. Throughout the interviews and focus group participants employed comparative language through which individuals, experiences, and communities were presented as perceived in relation to elsewhere, a finding that would seem to emphasize the significance of place and the geography of
rural identify. While this finding may be partially attributed the nature of the prompts and topic being discussed, the frequency of this language across participants and questions, suggests this conception of rurality is significant. Given, however, that this theme was so pervasive across participants and questions and that it emerged as a clear focal point within each of the other identified themes, it will be discussed in relation to those themes. The concept map presented below in figure 17 outlines the emergent themes discussed in this section.

**Figure 17**

*Emergent Themes Concept Map*

*Note.* The prevalent themes identified within the data are presented in the middle column above, while the subthemes and tensions that emerged within each larger theme are presented far right. Each will be discussed in the sections that follow.
Theme 1- Community & Relationships

When asked about rurality, one of the most evident themes to emerge was community and relationships. Across interviews and within the focus group the participants expressed a deep value of relationships and the ways in which their rural school and community lent itself to building and nurturing these relationships, both with colleagues and students. Each identified the sense of community and collaboration within the building and community as a strength and one of the reasons they chose to live and work in a rural community, and their stories and experiences suggested both pride and purpose in this aspect of rurality. All attributed their positive experiences and preferences for rurality to the closeness and familiarity possible within a small community and identified this as one of the strongest levers in rural education.

_Betsy._ When asked about living and learning in a rural community, Betsy, for instance, stated that the positives of rurality included the “smallness and closeness” of the rural community, emphasized through her mention of “neighbors” being “accountable to each another,” “close relationships,” and genuine “concern” for each other.

_Kyla._ Kyla commented that she “loved” the rural community. She said she enjoyed the closeness of a small town and that people in the community knew her, helped her, and cared about her. “In school it was the same,” she explained. “Teachers all knew me, encouraged me to do well, and supported me in my goals,” which she said is why she wanted to be a teacher.

_Robert._ Robert echoed this sentiment, commenting, “I grew up here, went to school here, and I chose to come back here because I like it here… Our community is a little more close-knit… it pulls together to help each other more than other places.”
focused on the positives of smaller communities and schools, noting the deep sense of community and how much people in small communities care about one another. He noted that this is a strength and a benefit both within the community and within the school because it allows for a better understanding of and more focused attention on students’ needs.

**Tia.** Tia also focused on the positives of rural community, stating that “It gives you a unique perspective and experience.” She spoke highly of her rural experience and the opportunities she had, and although she noted that there was a lot she didn’t understand or hadn’t experienced when she went to college, she said she felt she had brought experiences and understandings that kids from larger schools could not. She noted that people she met at college didn’t get the same level of school community involvement in their larger schools because there were so many kids.

**Tom.** Similarly, Tom spoke positively when asked about his experiences living and learning in a rural community. He expressed a belief that there are benefits to the smaller size of the school and the community, particularly the relationships that are built in these spaces, commenting, “I honestly like it. It’s small, but it’s where I’m comfortable and obviously, if I wanted to be somewhere else I could have been, but I like it here. I like the community and the closeness, so I think it’s a good thing.”

**Shae.** Shae responded as follows:

I like it a lot. I like being in a small community. I like that it’s small and everyone is so involved and knows each other. And, learning here, I liked it. It was a small school, my teachers cared about me, and would help me with anything… like a lot of my kids, I know I feel like the experience here is easier in some ways because
we are small and you can go to teachers and get what you need and people help.

And I don’t know that it’s always like that in bigger areas.

In all participants made more than 60 positive references to community across the individual interviews and focus group. In addition, there were 16 positive references to relationships and more than 50 mentions of getting to know students, family, and colleagues. Frequencies are presented in the table below (figure 18).

**Figure 18**

**Community/Relationship References**

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*Note. Figure 18 presents recurring phrases and language related to community and relationships, as well as the number of references that appeared across transcripts/participants.*

**Subthemes Within Community**

Within the theme of community and relationships participants referenced various types of relationships, noting the significance of each to the rural school experience. Specifically, participants spoke of the value of relationships with colleagues and students within the building, as well as their relationships with the broader community.

**Student Relationships**. The ability to build strong relationships with students was a recurring theme within interviews and the focus group. For instance, Robert repeatedly mentioned the relationships between and with students commenting that the rural school setting provides an experience that is “more personal.” Shae explained that
close relationships with students allow for a better understanding of “who they are,” which Betsy suggested helps teachers better understand “the why” behind student behaviors and outcomes.

“We get to have a much closer relationship with the kids,” said Robert. “Some of them you know that, that don't have a, well I don't know how you want to say it, but that you know what their background is like, and they don't have that support at home. Here it feels like, you know, we know that, and we can maybe provide a little more support, whether it be in the classroom or even going to an athletic event that some of their parents don't show up to. They love to see the teachers there, and we get to do that, whether it's athletics or any extracurricular activities.”

Similarly, Shae elaborated on this closeness, suggesting that this would not be the case in a larger school. “I can only speculate,” said Shae, “but I feel like whenever you're in a bigger school, just from my experience was talking with Miss Emily—she came from [a large school]—she felt like more of a number there to her teachers. None of them knew her personally or knew anything about her. She was just a number. She was overlooked. And here it's, well it's not like that. You get the more personal experience and get a lot more support and help and guidance.”

Shae further noted the academic benefit of these relationships commenting that “instruction wise, because we have such small groups, we may not be as fast-paced because you're more able to pick out those low-liers and kind of slow down and bring them up to speed. Where if you have a bigger class, you don't notice the kids who are falling behind, so you're not able to. You just kind of keep going and they just keep
getting further and further behind. Because we're rural and we're small, we do a better job at picking up those. Kids and bringing them along.”

Multiple participants also noted the significance of the relationships between students, particularly as it relates to students who might be struggling at home or in school. Robert noted that students “know what’s going on at school or outside of school” and are “usually supportive of each other.” Additionally, Shae noted the inclusiveness of the rural school community commenting that this is particularly important from a special education perspective. “I don't have to worry about them being bullied or being made fun of or being taunted or somebody hurting them,” said Shae. “They definitely don't understand social cues, but the kids here all know who they are, and they do a really good job of including them and giving them a lot of chances to be different I guess.” Betsy echoed this sentiment, stating that “the kids here are really good at tolerating each other’s uniqueness.”

**Colleague Relationships.** Relationships between colleagues was another talking point in both interviews and the focus group. Betsy, for instance, expressed a belief that larger schools likely have less positive relationships between co-workers and noted that the “family-style” workplace is one of the reasons she enjoys teaching in a rural community. “We’re a family,” said Betsy, “a team. In some places, I think, as teachers walk out of the teachers’ lounge, the teachers still in there are stabbing that teacher in the back. It’s competitive and back-bitey, and we just don’t have that here. We’re a close-knit community of teachers who have each other’s backs, and we’ll do anything for each other whether it’s our job or not. We’re always here to help each other.”
While Robert noted the smallness can sometime be downside because colleagues always know who is struggling, he said even that is positive in that teachers try assist one another in addressing those challenges. “Sometimes you’re the only teacher, or maybe you and your colleague are the only two that teach in that grade level at that school,” said Robert, “so if things don't go well, you know. Everybody knows who's struggling at it, but then we do try to help each other.” Similarly, Kyla stated that “teachers here care” and “try to encourage and support each other,” and Tom concurred, commenting that the staff works well together to create a supportive community. In short, data suggest the participants value these relationships with colleagues and see them as significant to school culture and their own success, as well as students’.

**Community Relationships.** Within these conversations another facet of community that emerged was relationships with and knowledge of the broader community. This often appeared in reference to knowing families and students’ situations outside of school, which participants said was an asset when building relationships within the school, as well as to understanding student behaviors and academic outcomes. Relationships with the broader community, however, also emerged in reference to school pride and support for school endeavors. Shae referenced the unique relationship rural educators have with families and the broader community, commenting that “that just doesn’t happen everywhere. It’s something unique to rural communities that a lot people just don’t see.” Similarly, Tia commented that the relationships with and support from the broader rural community afforded her “unique opportunities” that she wouldn’t have had at a larger school, citing the overlap between school and community as fostering increased engagement and involvement.
Tom also referenced the importance of this relationship, but noted he felt it had changed in recent years since the physical location of the school had moved from the center of town to just outside of town.

You know, we’ve always had that close relationship with the community, and it's just that I don’t think we have the same pride and sense of community that we used to since we moved. I think that pride really took a hit. The school was always right there at the center. It brought our community together. I think it's different from where we were to where we are now. I just don't think we're close as what we used to be… The move put the school outside the community. I think that was a big deal because I think our, you know, our pride took a hit. We used to be right there in the community and there was a lot of history, and a lot of people, I'm not going to say everyone, but a lot of people lost that when we moved. I don't mean everything, but our pride, our enthusiasm, I saw a big hit there, and I just think that was one thing that you know really brought us down, I think. We’re trying to get that back up here, just we were always down there. And I think that change with the community made a big difference in a lot things. Whether it’s academics or extracurricular that closeness with the community matters.

Such references to the broader community and its relationship to the school appeared throughout the interviews and focus group responses and was something that participants reported as either a current or former strength that needed to be nurtured and leveraged, as all agreed it was an asset that contributed positively to the rural school experience.
Here vs. There. Within the various discussions of community and relationships was a persistent comparison of community within rural communities to a perceived lack of community elsewhere. As participants discussed relationships between students and teachers, teachers and teachers, and the school and community, there were frequent mentions of relationships being stronger or closer in rural communities than in other communities. Whether it was Robert suggesting that rural communities are “more close-knit,” Betsy explaining that teachers in rural schools know their students “better,” Tia noting that she had a stronger sense of community than peers from larger schools, or Shae celebrating rural relationships and adding, “I don’t know that it’s always like that in bigger areas,” there was a seemingly consistent perception that building strong relationships was unique to rural communities, a dominant characteristic that set rural communities apart from other places—something better here than there.

Theme 2—Peripheralization

The second theme to emerge from the data and one closely related to conceptions of here versus there was peripheralization. According to Fischer-Tahir & Naumann (2013), peripheralization occurs “as a result of shifts in economic and political decision-making at various scales” and is “an outcome of the intrinsic logic of uneven geographical development in capitalist societies.” Looking at rural educational spaces through this lens, Azano and Biddle (2019) argued that “rural spaces are socially constructed as a geographic periphery” and that historically rural education “has been relegated to a sociocultural periphery” with dominant narratives “reinforcing that boundary” (4). Patterns within the data repeatedly pointed to such narratives that reinforce boundaries between the rural community and broader society, thus indicating a
dominant theme of peripheralization. While this theme was suggested by the previously noted comparative language often employed by participants throughout the interviews and focus group, as noted in the frequency table below (figure 19), it also appeared more concretely in the participants’ frequent use of spatial references and phrasing that made clear distinctions between the rural community and broader society—or as participants often called it “out there.”

**Figure 19**

**Peripheralization References**

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*Note. Figure 19 presents recurring phrases and language related to peripheralization, as well as the number of references that appeared across transcripts/participants.*

In addition to spatial references, references to visibility, as well as participants’ and students’ lack of awareness were also coded as peripheralization, as these discussions tended to center on an informational and experiential boundary between the rural community and “out there.”

**Out There.** The concept of “out there”—would seem to align to Azano and Biddle’s description of rural peripheralization and other than community was perhaps one of the most noticeable and pervasive themes to emerge in the interviews and focus group. The theme emerged in several forms, but the most common was the discussion of broader
society as “out there.” This phrase appeared 38 times in individual interview transcripts, as well as multiple times within the focus group. Variations of the phrase that seemed to carry similar connotations, such as “outside,” “outside world,” “other world,” and “the real world,” also appeared through the interview transcripts, with 42 additional appearances. These references appeared in discussions of rural strengths and broader society, as well as those related to student outcomes. In regard to rural strengths, “out there” seemed to separate the rural community from issues, events, and policies affecting other areas of the country, and worked to distance the rural community from these matters. In reference to students, however, “out there” often took on another meaning—a dangerous land of opportunity that they would either experience and not want or that they wouldn’t likely experience at all.

For instance, in Betsy’s discussion of where she see her students, “out there” seemed to be the goal, a sort of hallmark of success, but one that most students would not realize. She stated, “This is all they know so they don’t aspire to much else… don’t know what else is out there.” She later described students as “exist[ing] in a tunnel” and said, “All they know is what’s in front of them… I don’t know that education really matters to them because they don’t know what’s out there.” She added that most students will “just stay here” and emphasized the concept of “self-imposed” limitations to what’s possible because they don’t know what else is “out there.”

Despite previously stated strengths to living and working in a rural community and the protection the rural community offered from the world “out there,” in this case, “out there” seemed to connote opportunity and a goal for students, and students’ and families’ lack of awareness of that world beyond the community was a deficit impacting
Kyla commented, “Our kids here now are kids of parents who didn’t want anything else, so the kids don’t care about going anywhere else.” She elaborated on this, noting that “you ask these kids what they want to do and they say they’ll work at McDonald's or Walmart. Ask them to think about work and it’s just a list of things that they know from here. They don't know that there's other things. They don't know that there's other things out there that they can do because their parents and their parents’ parents don't have elaborate jobs, you know, they just don’t know.” She later added, “A handful I can see maybe going to college and getting a good job or going somewhere to see what else is out there, but most are not leaving this town.”

Tia and Shae also made several references to “out there,” both in reference to their own lack of experience, as well as in reference to students’ lack of understanding of broader society. Both identified this as a weakness in terms of students’ understanding, but while Tia suggested this would limit student outcomes and their understanding of opportunities available to them, Shae expressed the insulation from the “outside” world as a potential asset.

While the concept of “out there” as distinct from the rural community was a theme expressed by all participants, for Robert and Tom “out there” was presented less as a space of opportunity and more as space that might naively be considered superior. For instance, Robert noted rural communities’ lack of appeal to “outsiders” because they fail to see what rural communities offer, adding that students sometimes experience the
converse of this by thinking that “out there” is better. Tom echoed this sentiment, adding that he often cautions students about the world “out there.”

…there’s enough information available on what’s going on out in the world, with social media and everything, that they wonder. They see everything going on out in the world and maybe come to think that’s for them. They’ll probably have some realizations if they get out there. I always tell them don’t believe everything you see on the internet because it isn’t always what you think. It isn’t all good out there.

Although this perception of “out there” being more complicated or even dangerous than the local community was a theme expressed by all participants, how it related to students varied to some extent, with some participants contradicting these assertions in reference to students and seeming to equate desired student outcomes with “out there.” Others, such as Robert and Tom, maintained their cautionary position. Regardless of that position, the language of “out there” suggested a clear separation between the rural community and broader society. It appeared almost an affirmation to students and self that the rural community exists outside the norm, that the community and those within it are somehow separate from what is real.

Levels of Awareness. This perception of separation was further suggested by participants’ frequent discussion of awareness, which was also coded under the theme of peripheralization. These references appeared throughout interviews and across participants in references to themselves, their students, and broader society, further suggesting a here versus there conception of rurality. In reference to their own experiences and awareness, multiple participants commented on their rural experiences as
being what was familiar and offered self-assessments in which they suggested their own knowledge of broader society was limited. Tia, for instance, commented “I wouldn’t say I’m very well versed in what’s going on in the world either. I grew up here, went to school here, and came back here, so I don’t always know what all is going on in the world out there.” Similarly, Shae stated that she doesn’t “get too involved outside of here,” adding “I don't really think about the outside world or pay a lot of attention to news and stuff outside of the area.” In reference to themselves, this ability to remain distanced from broader society was often presented as a benefit of rural life; however, when discussing students’ and families’ lack of awareness, awareness of “out there” was presented by the majority of participants as challenge or educational obstacle, as evidenced by Betsy’s comment that “All they know is what’s in front of them. I don’t know that education really matters to them because they don’t know what’s out there” and Kyla’s statement that students “have no idea, and it’s almost like they don’t get it. And I think that's just because, like I said, they don’t see it here.”

In other contexts awareness of broader society was presented as a source of confusion, as students’ lack of experience outside the community might contribute to misguided understandings of “out there.” This pattern surfaced in discussions of students’ growing awareness via internet and social media. Tom, for example, explaining that students know a lot more than in previous generations because of the internet, said “They’ll probably have some realizations if they get out there. I always tell them don’t believe everything you see on the internet because it isn’t always what you think. It isn’t all good out there.” Tia similarly noted that students “see a lot on social media,” but it is so “different than it is here,” they aren’t able to contextualize what they see or “fully
understand it.” Robert also alluded to this dynamic, noting that some students hear about things happening in “bigger” schools or communities and begin “thinking there might be more opportunities,” but “Is it really better?” he asked. “A big school and big city experience doesn’t guarantee anything.” Although these types of responses noted a growing awareness of broader society, this awareness was often qualified in a way that further reinforced the here versus there dynamic and the persistence of the perceived core-periphery boundary.

This boundary was also highlighted through comments regarding a lack of awareness of rural communities by those outside the community, suggesting that participants perceive this boundary as limiting access from both sides. Robert expressed some frustration over this, noting that he wishes people “could see the good” in rural communities and then commenting on broader society “not investing in rural communities.” Shae also discussed her belief that not enough people “see” that rural schools “can be amazing places” because of the closeness of the community and what teachers are able to do for students who might “slip through the cracks” elsewhere, adding “I don’t think people always realize that.” For Betsy, this failure to see rural communities could at times be positive because it protects the community from outside influence, but her statements suggest a sense of invisibility. “We're just small enough that nobody cares about us,” said Betsy. “Nobody even knows we're here.”

Invisibility. Betsy’s perceptions of invisibility relate to another pattern throughout the data coded under the theme of peripheralization, which was language related to sight. All participants referenced a lack of visibility in their interviews. Some, such as Betsy, Kyla, and Tia, suggested students could not see beyond their community
and were thus unable to see the relevance of education or its applications beyond getting a high school diploma. In short, they expressed that broader society and the opportunities available there were not visible to students. Some also suggested that because the community is a “generational community,” a lot of families and caregivers had not seen the world “out there” and as result “imposed limits on themselves.” As Kyla noted, “They don’t see it. The families start here and stay here, so that’s all they know.” For others this failure to see was a fault of a broader society whose faulty vision underestimated the strength and assets of rural communities. In all its forms, however, was a clearly expressed perception of barriers and boundaries separating the rural community from elsewhere, of a distinct here and an equally distinct there, with here being the outlier.

**Theme 3-- Conceptions of Success**

Throughout the interviews participants discussed student experiences of rurality and rural education, as well as where they saw students in the future, and in these discussions all participants to some extent expressed conceptions of success, be it their own or that of students. Therefore, participant statements related to their own successes living and working in a rural community, their hopes for students, student aspirations, and anticipated outcomes were considered within this theme. All participants offered commentary on these topics, but what was particularly notable, however, was the variance in how outcomes were conceptualized by participants and tensions and dichotomies present in these discussions. For some, success was presented as “out there,” while for others, it might be within the local community. For some success seemed to be defined by college, but for others it was vocational or trade training. But perhaps the most interesting tension observed in the data was that for some participants, student success
looked different than their own. These are notable findings since conceptions of success often serve as a means of measuring or gauging one’s effectiveness and these conceptions of success may provide insights into understanding participants’ perceptions of teacher and collective efficacy.

**Here vs. There.** As previously noted, the theme of here versus there and the tension it embodies seemed to permeate discussions of students and self, and this was certainly true of conceptions of success. As participants discussed student outcomes, it became apparent that conceptions of success were sometimes competing and contradictory with a clear tension between local outcomes and the world “out there.” One of the first patterns to emerge was the invoking of the illustrious “out there” as a sort of hallmark of student success. Although this was not true across all participants, this trend was observed in half of participants, who repeatedly lamented that students would not leave the community or aspire to anything beyond a high school diploma and the local workforce. Betsy seemed to exemplify this belief, remarking that “all they know is what’s in front of them…I see my students in this county… There’s these limits they’ve imposed on themselves based on their socioeconomic status.” She then added, “It’s sad, depressing.” Kyla expressed a similar belief. “You ask these kids what they want to do and they say they’ll work at McDonald's or Walmart,” said Kyla. “Ask them to think about work and it’s just a list of things that they know from here. They don’t know there’s other things out there.” She later added, “Most won’t leave this town. We don’t have many kids who want to do well in school, who want to go get a cool job that makes good money because their parents don’t. Most will just end up getting a job close by doing whatever.” Tia responded similarly. “Most of them stay here, don’t work for a while, or get a minimum wage job
and try to find something they can stay at…” she explained. Despite living and working within the rural community themselves, each of these participants seemed to conceptualize success for students as lying “out there” beyond the imagined rural boundary.

While all participants, regardless of their conception of success, agreed that most students would remain locally after graduation, some participants did seem to accept the local workforce as a form of success, although in some instances this outcome was presented with a caveat. Robert, for instance, noted the need for all types of workers, mentioning that the oil and gas industry is still doing well in the area and predicting that may be where many students land post-graduation. “A lot them will stay here. Most of them stay here. Probably doing more hands-on, laborer-type jobs. That’s good though. We need people to do all kinds of jobs.” He also mentioned that he saw the community and students as having “more of a workforce” mentality “rather than higher education.” And while he asserted this is an acceptable outcome for students, he did raise questions about the sustainability of the local job market and whether or not local jobs would always be available to these students. “The ones who like it here or don’t aspire to anything more will stay, but then what?” said Robert. “Oil and gas won’t last forever.”

Tia also alluded to this in her discussion of student outcomes, noting that a local trade might be a reasonable alternative to college for some students, but questioning the long-term outcomes. Interestingly, while these participants identified the local workforce as an acceptable outcome for students and a form of success, they still expressed a certain tension between here and there, questioning whether long-terms outcomes for those who remain here might be limited.
Shae, who works exclusively with special education students, stood as an outlier in terms of her conceptualization of student success. While other participants seemed to believe success lied “out there” or that here-based success might have limitations, Shae focused more emphatically on the local workforce as exemplifying student success. “I see my students in the workforce somewhere,” said Shae. “We really focus on that. We want them to be successful, and we do a lot to find places where they can be successful.” She noted that her students’ entrance into the local workforce enabled a smoother transition from school to career and also facilitated an ongoing relationship with teachers and support networks that began in the school setting. “Even after they graduate, we try to support them in that. We welcome them to come back and get help if they need it, let us know if they need anything and how they’re doing, and some do,” explained Shae, later adding, “People don’t always realize just what teachers do and all the people that like come back, you know? I don't think you see that at a bigger school. I think that’s something kind of unique to here.” For Shae, the local workforce is success and a success that enables both educators and students to further leverage relationships and community post-graduation. And although these outcomes were not presented as qualified success, the here versus there tension still emerged in Shae’s assertion that this quality is a uniquely rural opportunity.

**Academic vs. Trade.** As evidenced in Robert’s description of the community as “more workforce” than “higher education,” embedded within the here versus there tensions discussed above was an apparent tension between academic and trade pursuits and what qualified as actual success. Those participants who equated success with “out there” also seemed to conceptualize success in terms of higher education, often depicting
leaving the area to attend college as the most desirable student outcome and employment that required this education as superior. Even some of those who presented entering the local workforce as a positive student outcome or a form of success at times presented this option as though it were less than more academic options. Kyla, for example, noted “We don’t have many kids who want to do well in school, who want to go get a cool job that makes good money because their parents don’t.” She further explained that while there are a few kids who might want to go to college to be a teacher or a nurse or “something that we see every day,” most students “don’t see education as valuable.” Similarly, Tia’s discussion of student outcomes included similar conceptualizing in which successful students were depicted as those who attended college. “Not a lot of them are going to college and that’s the way it’s been for a while,” said Tia. She stated that “a few might” go to the nearby technical college or branch campus, which she said is “a good option for some of them because it’s usually free, but not a lot of students even utilize that.” In both of these statements, academic-based success seems to be given preference over trade/vocational options.

Although this tension emerged overtly in three of six participants, it was alluded to more subtly by two others, specifically in their discussion of their own children. Although both Robert and Shae directly identified local workforce and trade pursuits as positive student outcomes—an Shae emphatically so for special education students—during the individual interviews, both participants also pointed to their own children and their successes in academia outside the community as evidence of the quality of rural education and examples of successful graduates of the school. For instance, Robert described his son’s current collegiate work and his aspirations to be a college professor to
highlight that rural schools can equip students with the skills to succeed, commenting that “he received the same education as all these other kids, and he’s doing great because you get out of it what you put into it.” While neither participant directly expressed a personal view of academic pursuits being more desirable than vocational pursuits, neither presented trade successes as exemplars of student success. This was true of all four of the participants who provided specific examples of student success, as all discussed students who were faring well in university settings or who would be attending a college outside the area in the fall. This choice to exclusively highlight academic examples of student successes post-graduation is by no means an explicit statement regarding perceived value or preference regarding student outcomes, but the exclusion of other examples is worth noting and may be indicative of a narrow view of student success that emphasizes there over here.

Me vs. Them. Another inferential pattern to emerge within this theme was the contradictions between personal success and that of students. Despite the fact that each of the participants lives and works in the rural area in which they were raised and despite their own professed preferences for this community and the positive experiences they attribute to living and working in the rural community, as noted above, the majority of participants suggested success for students lies elsewhere. Although one might infer that these conceptions of student success were rooted in personal regret or their own unrealized aspirations, none of the participants expressed such regret and all spoke favorably of their decision to remain in the rural community. “I never wanted bigger,” said Shae. “I love it here. I like having the intimate family setting with not only the teachers but the kids and everything, and the problems that we do have here I feel like are
minimal compared to the problems that could be.” Kyla also reported that she had never wanted to leave the area and preferred the community of staying rural. “I would hate [living in a city],” said Kyla. “I like the quiet and closeness of a small town.” Similar sentiments were echoed by each of the participants, all of whom spoke positively of the relationships, support, and slower pace of rural living, as well as the safety and protection afforded by being in the periphery; yet the expectation that students would not leave the community was often attributed to a lack of goal-setting, limited ambition, and a failure to see the better opportunities available to them “out there.” This tension between here and there and the contradictions embodied in these responses are worth noting, as they suggest participants conceptualize success for themselves differently than they are conceptualizing it for students, and although never explicitly acknowledged, this double-standard would seem further evidence of the here versus there dichotomy.

**Theme 4—Outcome Attribution**

In addition to expressing their conceptions of success, participants also expressed beliefs regarding the variables that impact these outcomes, particularly student outcomes. One of the more frequently noted variables was awareness of “out there,” but since this perception of awareness was discussed in detail in its relationship to peripheralization, this section will focus on the additional perceived influences that appeared in the data. Although participants mentioned a number of potential influences, including the internet, social media, and school location, the most prevalent variables discussed by participants were those related to familial contexts, valuing education, and work ethic (presented as “bootstrapper mentality”). References to external variables appeared across all participants and questions, and given that students’ likelihood of success was by the
majority of participants more frequently attributed to external variables than to
instruction or teacher behaviors, these references have been categorized under the theme
of Outcome Attribution. These patterns of attribution and the beliefs and frames to which
they contribute have the power to shift perceptions of responsibility away from the
school, impeding the development of actionable solutions, and are thus worth noting. As
suggested by Coburn (2006), identifying potentially detrimental beliefs and working
towards reframing can provide a means to a shared vision and potential solutions within
the school’s sphere of influence. Figure 20 presents the patterns of outcome attribution
identified in the analysis of the data and the frequencies for each category of reference.

**Figure 20**

*Outcome Attribution References*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Outcome Attribution</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Family / Home Life</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Valuing Education</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bootstrapper Mentality</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internet / Social Media</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Grand Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>133</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Figure 20 presents the categories of outcome attribution that emerged in the data, as
well as the number of references that appeared across transcripts/participants.
Familial Contexts.

Figure 21

Familial Outcome Attribution

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>References to the Influence of Home and Family</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Generational Influences</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Families</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents / Mom &amp; Dad</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Backgrounds</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At Home / Home Life</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Grand Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>55</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. Figure 21 presents recurring phrases and language related to familial outcome attribution, as well as the number of references that appeared across transcripts/participants.*

As noted in the frequency table above, participants made 55 references to the role of students’ families and home life, often referring to student outcomes as generational. While all of the participants made mention of these variables at least once, and three of the six participants—Betsy, Kyla, and Tia—focused heavily on these influences with references to familial contexts and home life appearing across questions and being connected to students’ perceptions of rurality, students’ awareness of opportunity, students’ academic dispositions, and most emphatically students’ outcomes. These participants also cited familial and home contexts when discussing what they perceived as their own limited impact on these outcomes. When asked where she sees her students in the future, Betsy, for instance, stated that student outcomes “[have] to do with their background—no value of education, no support, no goals for the future,” and when asked about the impact she felt she had on these outcomes, she expressed a belief that she would have “very little” influence because she was up against generational values and
habits. She then commented on students’ “horrible backgrounds” and her belief that families are “not talking about this stuff at home…They’re not sitting around the table at night having conversations about it.”

This sentiment was echoed by Kyla, who when asked about student outcomes commented that “We don’t have many kids who want to do well in school, who want to go get a cool job that makes good money because their parents don’t,” and when asked about her impact on outcomes, she suggested it was limited, explaining that impact often “depends on a student’s background.” “Most parents in the community are those who never wanted more or desired to leave the area,” said Kyla, “so they raise kids the same way.” Similarly, when discussing student outcomes, Tia asserted that “they aren’t getting exposed to much at home,” explaining that the community is a generational community, where most parents grew up here and if not grew up rural, so the experiences they share with students are limited. She returned to these generational and home influences when discussing her impact, commenting that students “are just here to get done” and that “their mind is already made up,” adding that this is often because of parents. “That’s a value that your parents have and pass on to you,” said Tia.

While references to familial and generational influences were not as frequent or central in responses from the other three participants, they were nevertheless present. Shae alluded to familial influence when discussing a particular student who had dropped out of school, noting that “his dad didn’t graduate, his mom didn’t graduate—they just didn’t have that emphasis on education.” She went on to explain that this makes student successes that much more meaning because she understands the challenges both she and students are up against. When discussing his impact, Robert noted that not all students
and families value education in the same way and that this can influence how much impact a teacher can have because ultimately “whatever you put into it is what you get out of it.” Tom also referenced familial influences when discussing student outcomes, stating that family values “can be an issue” because students don’t always worry about grades or see school as important” because “mom and dad don’t put as much emphasis on that.”

Valuing Education. Inextricably intertwined in these discussions of family and generational influences was the perception of students and families not valuing education, a perceived hindrance to student outcomes communicated by all six participants. References to families not valuing education appeared 18 times in the individual interviews, most frequently as addendums to the aforementioned references to familial contexts, and typically framed as a primary driver for poor student outcomes, narrow aspirations, and limited educator impact. Tia, for instance, explained that she believes her impact on student outcomes is often limited by students’ lack of awareness and a cultural tendency not to value education. “I don’t think a lot of parents around here do place value on education,” said Tia, “so kids just feel like that’s not what they want or it’s not worth the effort.” Kyla commented that she feels she has the greatest impact with the “few kids who come up like me whose families promote education,” but expressed that “a lot of students don’t,” which she said she felt limited her ability to make a difference. This perception was also reported by Betsy, who called the lack of value placed on education “sad” and “depressing.” Each participant referenced families valuing education as a fundamental driver for student success at least once, with the majority of participants referencing this belief multiple times. These comments suggest a strong belief about the
nature of rural families, at least those of their students, as well as a belief about their own agency as educators, as this attribution suggests an external locus of control separating teachers from student outcomes.

**Bootstrapper Mentality.** This relinquishing of educators’ agency in relation to student outcomes also emerged through the concept of effort and “getting out of it what you put into it,” a phrase that appeared in transcripts 10 times. While this phrase often appeared in direct connection to familial influence and valuing education, it also appeared in more individualistic references to students and outcomes, and suggests what Gibbons, et al. (2020) describe as the “bootstrapper mentality,” a term coined from the expression “pull yourself up by your bootstraps” (p. 174). In their research on rural Appalachian barriers to post-secondary education, Gibbons, et al. reported this mentality was a strong cultural value held by many rural Appalachians and was typically characterized by “a strong sense of self-reliance” and “a belief that success [comes] solely from hard work and desire” (p. 176). In relation to education, Gibbons, et al. noted that those subscribing to the “bootstrapper mentality” tend to believe that when students encounter barriers or difficulties they can be “overcome through hard work and self-reliance rather than with outside support or assistance” and that achievement is solely a matter of “determination and having the right mind-set” (p. 174). Although “getting out of it what you put into it” was perhaps the most overt suggestion of the bootstrapper mentality, participants also made numerous references to students’ need to put in effort or hard work and possess the drive to overcome. Betsy, for instance, referenced students’ lack of drive to overcome bad situations, commenting that “they have to have that internal drive to succeed beyond what society says they should, and most don’t have it.”
This mentality also emerged in the focus group when discussing opportunities at the rural school. Robert expressed frustration at the perception of less course offerings, noting that kids can take college classes on a variety of topics. “It’s whether you want it or not,” said Robert, “and some of them have refused to do it because they think it’s going to be hard to do—yeah, it should be hard.”

This belief that success is simply a matter of wanting it and working for it surfaced in a variety of contexts and appeared in various forms. Statements included “if you want to excel, you will”; “they just have to make up their mind”; “The kids that want to excel and do well have”; “they have to want to do something with their life”; “they just don’t want to do well, they don’t care”; and a variety other statements related to effort, desire, and drive. In addition, responses related to working hard for good grades were also connected to this theme, as many presented grades as a student’s independent path to success. The frequencies of these responses are presented in the table below (figure 22).

**Figure 22**

*Bootstrapper References*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Bootstrapper Language</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Want to Excel</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overcome</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hard Work</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good Grades</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Get Out What You Put In</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effort</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drive</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Grand Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>52</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. Figure 22 presents recurring phrases and language related to the “bootstrapper mentality,” as well as the number of references that appeared across transcripts/participants.*
Regardless of the form in which it appeared, each of these references suggests a belief that the responsibility for student outcomes falls on the student, and while one might argue that there is merit to the benefits of desire, drive, and hard work, this mentality would seem to minimize the impact teachers believe they can have on positive outcomes.

**Us vs. Them.** Throughout the various identified themes the tension of here versus there has been pervasive, and in terms of outcome attribution, this tension appeared predominantly in the participants’ discussion of awareness or rather students’ and families’ lack of awareness. Although discussed separately as a facet of peripheralization, this belief in families’ lack of awareness certainly relates to the conceptions of familial influences discussed in this section. When examining other aspects of outcome attribution, however, another tension emerged—that of us versus them. Be it discussions of familial influences, valuing education, or the role of determination and mindset, participants frequently seemed to perceive themselves as standing in opposition to students’ and families’ values, beliefs, and behaviors. Participants often presented families and students as not valuing education and failing to recognize its relevance, attributing both student outcomes and their own impact, or lack of impact, on these outcomes to families and students. These findings called to mind Coburn’s (2006) discussion of responsibility and the tendency of educators to frame challenges as by-products of variables outside their influence. This framing may shift responsibility away from educators and thus impede the development of immediately actionable solutions, which in turn may impact educators’ beliefs regarding their ability positively influence student outcomes and may provide insights for the tensions between fatalism and optimism discussed in the next section.
Theme 5—Impact on Student Outcomes

The final theme to emerge was impact on student outcomes, which participants were asked to directly address during individual interviews. This theme was, therefore, present across all participants. Although the prevalence of external attribution in discussions of students related to other questions would seem to imply the majority of participants attributed student outcomes to variables other than themselves, when asked to directly address their personal influence on outcomes, initial responses were varied. Three of the six participants expressed feelings of having a limited impact—for instance, when asked about the impact she felt she had on student outcomes, Betsy said “very little,” adding that she doesn’t “feel like education can impact” because students and families are not educationally minded. Kyla responded, “I don’t know,” and then elaborated on this statement by discussing students’ backgrounds and the cultural challenges to being impactful. Similarly, Tia commented that she has “some impact,” but then noted that impact is often limited because families “do not value education” and students’ minds are “already made up.”

Two participants, Robert and Tom, stated they felt they had a significant impact but then qualified their statements with contextual conditions. Both noted the importance of families and background, but as presented in the discussion of bootstrapper mentalities, largely attributed student outcomes to internal drive and a personal motivation to succeed despite circumstances. Robert, for instance, said he believes rural teachers may have a greater influence than elsewhere because of “small class sizes” and their ability “to get on those kid’s that don’t want to put forth effort,” but then added that not all students and families value education in the same way which influences how much
impact a teacher can have because ultimately “whatever you put into it is what you get out of it.” Tom stated he believes he has a “huge influence” because teachers “are the ones who are here with them, who encourage them and tell them about the world and what’s out there,” but he too asserted that it often comes down to “family values” and “what you put into it.” Only Shae was consistently optimistic in her expression of her perceived impact, sharing stories of her students’ successes, such as graduating, finding gainful employment, and moving into their own housing. She attributed much of her impact to close relationships, commenting, “I know I make a difference.”

**Fatalism vs. Optimism.** Examining this data in relation to other responses and the various references to impact and outcomes in those discussions revealed an emerging tension between expressions of fatalism and optimism. In his 2007 study of fatalism and identity development in Appalachia, Phillips (2007) explained fatalism as a tendency to perceive events and outcomes as bound to happen due to an external locus of control. Outcomes are often attributed to external variables or some larger perceived outside force, which Phillips asserted can limit perceptions of the future and possibility. For the purposes of his research, Phillips operationalized fatalism in terms of “higher hopelessness and lower optimism and efficacy” (Phillips, 2007, p.11). Participants’ responses were considered through this lens, and statements in which they expressed perceptions of having little influence over outcomes, expressed hopelessness related to outcomes attributed to external variables, or made predictive claims about what students cannot or will not accomplish were then coded as fatalistic. These statements included responses such as Betsy’s claim that students’ “parents grew up here; their grandparents grew up here, and they don’t really go any further than this,” as well as her comment that
“I don’t feel education can impact” and her claim that “most won’t leave this town.” It also included Kyla’s comment that “The families start here and stay here,” and Tia’s comment that her influence is limited because “their mind is already made up” and her prediction that students will “stay here” and “job hop.” While these types of comments appeared across five of the six participants, occurrences were not evenly distributed. Frequencies are presented in the figure 23.

**Figure 23**

**Fatalism References**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fatalistic Language</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Betsy</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kyla</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tia</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robert</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tom</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shae</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Grand Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>25</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. Figure 23 presents the prevalence of fatalistic language across participants by listing the frequency of occurrence for each participant.*

Despite the prevalence of fatalistic thinking—particularly when asked directly about what they perceived as their impact on student outcomes—all six participants also expressed a seemingly contradictory sort of rural optimism when referencing their impact on student outcomes indirectly. This rural optimism was characterized by a strong belief in the power of relationships and an ability to connect with students in smaller settings and often referenced participants’ ability to meet students’ needs, ensure no student “falls through the cracks,” and provide a more personalized and meaningful educational experience than that afforded in larger settings. For instance, although Betsy claimed she
has “very little” influence on student outcomes in the final interview question, citing generational and cultural values at carrying greater influence, elsewhere in the interviews she lauded the “close-knit” community of rural education and claimed that “kids don't fall through the cracks here” and added, “we really get to know the kids…it’s like family.” Similarly, Tia noted the close relationships and community of the rural school explaining that students “are getting something here that they can’t get at other places.” Robert echoed this sentiment, commenting that rural teachers are able to establish a “closer relationship with kids” and “provide a little more support whether it be in the classroom or even going to an athletic event that some of their parents don't even show up to.” Shae also spoke to rural teachers’ ability to know students personally, consider their backgrounds and lived experience and identify strengths and needs. “Because we're rural and we're small,” explained Shae, “we do a better job at picking up kids and bringing them in.”

These optimistic claims of impact and rural advantage suggest that participants recognize their influence in real time and believe their interactions with students do make a difference; however, these moments of recognition stand in sharp contrast to the fatalism expressed by the majority of participants regarding long-term outcomes for students. This contrast suggests that some participants may be compartmentalizing conceptions of impact, distinguishing these day-to-day moments of influence as separate from and minimally related to long-term student outcomes, which they are predominantly attributing to external variables outside their perceived sphere of influence. In short, the impact data suggest participants perceive themselves as having little agency over long-term student outcomes despite their perceived influence over students’ educational
experiences, and these conflicting conceptions of impact appear to produce an ongoing oscillation between fatalistic hopelessness and an optimistic belief that what they do matters.

That said, Shae stood as an outlier in this regard, as she seemed consistently confident in her ability to impact students—both in the moment and long-term—a possibility she attributed to rural contexts and her ability to leverage community and build strong relationships. “I love it here, and I love my kids. We know each other and know our students and families, and you don’t always see that,” said Shae. “People don’t always realize just what teachers do. And all the people that like come back you know. I don't think you see that at a bigger school. I think that’s something kind of unique to here. And I don’t think people always realize that,” she continued. “I've maintained relationships with most of [my students] after they graduate, even like they still check in with me and tell me things that they've done well or how their job’s going, or that they got their own place.” She noted that past students sometimes even contact her for assistance with these life events. “If they don't know how to do something, don't know how to pay a bill or how to set up their stuff online, they'll still reach out and ask me how to do that,” said Shae. “So I feel like it makes my job more meaningful because of the relationships that I've built with them…I know I make a difference.”

**Considering Interview Data As It Relates to Efficacy**

These expressed beliefs regarding impact seemed to correlate overall to the efficacy survey results. Betsy, Kyla, and Tia, who expressed the most limited view of their own impact, comprised the bottom half of both individual and collective efficacy scores, while Shae, who appeared to define success for her students somewhat differently
and consistently expressed a strong belief in her ability to impact student outcomes, had the highest self-rating on the individual efficacy survey. Robert and Tom, the two most frequent proponents of bootstrapper mentality reported the highest perceptions of collective efficacy and second highest scores on teacher efficacy, with low outlying items on the efficacy surveys related to student behaviors and dispositions. Given that a bootstrapper mentality places responsibility for outcomes onto the students rather than teachers, these findings would seem to reflect consistency across data sets, as by this theory, student outcomes do not necessary reflect the participants’ own perceived abilities as educators but rather students’ will and effort.

Additionally, as noted in the presentation of the efficacy data, the item analysis of the efficacy surveys revealed that participants consistently reported higher efficacy ratings in areas related to their own knowledge and instructional ability, with lower scoring items across participants being those related to student behaviors and student outcomes. The following by Soodak & Podell (1996) might prove relevant for discussing these results in terms of outcome expectations:

Bandura proposed two cognitively based sources of motivation: outcome expectations and efficacy expectations. Outcome expectations refer to a person's estimation that a given behavior will lead to a specific outcome, whereas efficacy expectations refer to the individual's belief that he or she is capable of demonstrating the behaviors necessary to achieve the outcome. Bandura postulated that these discrete expectations interact to determine the initiation and persistence of coping behaviors. In other words, the confidence one has that behavior will lead to outcomes, together with the confidence one has in one's
ability to perform the behavior, determines one's actions. (Soodak & Podell, 1996, p. 401-2).

Soodak and Podell’s interpretation of Bandura’s theory suggests that teachers may separate efficacy expectations and outcome expectations, holding “two independent beliefs” simultaneously—one belief regarding their ability to teach, and a separate belief regarding the relationship between that ability and student outcomes (p. 409). Distinguishing between these beliefs and separating themselves from student outcomes may provide an explanation for participants’ tendency toward external attribution and what initially appeared to be inconsistencies between the survey and interview data. As Soodak and Podell explain, “although these teachers feel skillful, they do not believe their actions will be effective with this population” (p. 409). Figure 24 presents a theoretical conceptualization of the relationships observed in the data based on this interpretation.
Figure 24

**Efficacy Findings in Relation to Interview Data: A Theoretical Conceptualization**

Note. Figure 24 depicts the relationship between beliefs and perceptions of efficacy, noting what the findings suggested is distinction between instructional efficacy and perceptions of impacting student outcomes. As depicted above, the data suggest that beliefs about rurality, and students and families may contribute to outcome attributions that reinforce this bifurcated view.
CHAPTER FIVE: IMPLICATIONS & LIMITATIONS

Introduction

In this chapter I will revisit the theoretical framework presented in Chapter 3, reflect on the data presented in Chapter 4 in the context of this framework, and discuss potential implications and recommendations for educators wishing to impact change in rural contexts. I will also discuss the limitations of the study, my positionality to the study and its data, and the lessons learned for my own leadership agenda.

Revisiting the Theoretical Framework

As explicated in Chapter 2, the utilized theoretical frame combines Peircean belief theory (Anderson, 2005; Cunningham, et al., 2005; Kaag, 2012; Schreiber & Moss, 2002) and Sen’s theory of adaptive preferences (Sen, 1999; Teschl & Comim, 2005; Watts, et al., 2008) as a lens for examining the relationship between culturally reinforced belief-based adaptations and perceptions of efficacy. The framework also emphasizes Freirean (2009) concepts of critical dialogue and place-based pedagogy as a potential means of belief revision. These theories directly address the role of culture in the development of beliefs, as well as the ways in which beliefs about self and others in relation to cultural forces can contribute to interpretations of capability and in turn aspirations, and thus provides a lens for understanding and contextualizing both the formation of beliefs—particularly those situated within rural culture—and their potential impact on perceived agency.

Considering Beliefs

Peircean belief theory was of particular significance because limiting beliefs about rurality are often situated within long-standing historical narratives emphasizing
poverty, loss, and a separateness from broader society—narratives that for many rural communities may have been internalized as the familiar and reinforced through existing systems of authority. Also of importance is the potential role educators play in belief formation. According to Peircean theory, although beliefs are often experienced as personal truth and asserted as fact, they are not, as Kaag (2012) asserts, actual knowledge. Rather beliefs are often “cultural or biological inheritance” (p. 516), shaped by people—both individually and collectively—as well as by experiences; yet, they are often internalized as unquestionable truths. This fixation of belief can occur in a variety of ways, but of particular relevance to conceptions of rurality and their transmission to students is what Peirce refers to as “tenacity,” a means of fixation in which what is familiar and aligns with current thought and action becomes one’s individual and cultural truth (Anderson, 2005; Cunningham, 1998; Cunningham, Schreiber, & Moss, 2005; Kaag, 2012; Schreiber & Moss, 2002). These “truths” regardless of accuracy, can then serve as the frame for both action and aspiration. In the case of rural contexts, if both media and community have familiarized deficit narratives and peripheral status, these narratives could become fixed and regarded as truth—not just for students, but for educators and the communities they serve as well.

This theory also suggests that educators are authorized transmitters of information within established social institutions, and although they are often perceived as experts or authorities, they are not apart from the community and culture itself, particularly in rural communities where the teachers who stay and wield the greatest influence are often those who were raised in the rural community in which they teach and live. These teachers have, as Peirce described, been surrounded by the manners, associations, and teachings of
their rural communities, as well as the historical and popular depictions of rurality, which as Peine, et al. (2020) argued, have power both outside and inside rural communities.

“Narratives of dispossession, marginality, and pathology are powerful, both in how they shape outsiders’ views of the region and in terms of policy. However, these narratives can be internalized and can permeate the expectations and horizons of the possible in Appalachian communities” (Peine, et al., 2020, p. 49).

Viewed within the context of Peircean theory, these teachers may then represent both the product and the transmission of tenacity and authority fixation. They may provide valuable insights for understanding the development of limiting beliefs about rurality, as their beliefs and those they espouse in classroom contexts are often situated within long-standing historical narratives emphasizing poverty, loss, and a separateness from broader society. In many rural communities, these narratives have been internalized as the familiar and reinforced through diverse systems of authority, including historical contexts and experiences that have shaped local culture and its intersections with national culture, policies impacting rural schools and communities at both the local and national level, and media depictions of rurality that are seen both in and out of rural communities. These systems, however, may also be embodied in the interactions and experiences students have within schools. In this way, schools themselves function as a system of authority and teachers are uniquely positioned within them. As individuals they are shaped by the processes of fixation, but as educators they contribute to these processes.

When considering the data through this lens, emerging themes and efficacy data suggest that these teachers do hold strong and often contradictory beliefs about rurality. These beliefs are often fraught with tensions. While participants believe rural
communities have strengths and attributes that have contributed positively to their own learning and experiences, many also simultaneously hold beliefs about the rural experience that could be perceived as limiting, and these beliefs often seem to relate to perceived boundaries and a seeming internalization of periphery status. A consistently expressed distinction between the rural world and the “outside” or “real world” would seem to reinforce that perceived boundary and in turn periphery narratives. While these boundaries are at times perceived as strengths of the rural community, particularly as it relates to community and safety, they were also expressed as limitations in terms of educational impact and student success. This was evidenced throughout the interviews in participants’ discussion of awareness and invisibility, as well as their discussions of where they saw students in the future.

Throughout these discussions beliefs about the rural experience, rural students, and rural families emerged, many of which suggested a belief that students were confined by culture and geography. Although a sense of pride about the rural school and the connections with students was a prominent feature in participant responses, equally evident was an expressed tension with broader society, and much as Guarjardo, et al. (2016, p.14) described, “the sense of low expectations was palpable,” and there was a persistent “notion that they could not dream big.” These beliefs regarding rural families and students, although presented by participants as grounded in lived experiences, in many ways seem to echo, or perhaps imitate, the history of hegemonic narratives and peripheral depictions of rurality and may evidence the internalization of “marginality” and “pathology” discussed by Peine (2020). Furthermore, given the historical prominence of this narrative and its current prevalence across data sets, participants’ acceptance and
presentation of these conceptions as fact suggests the influence of tenacity and authority fixation on the beliefs of participants, as well as participants’ potential to contribute to further transmission.

The data also revealed evidence of persistent beliefs regarding the impermeability of perceived core-periphery boundaries, or for some a sense of one way permeation, a point often highlighted through the here versus there dichotomy. These tensions suggested a belief that rural communities are separated from the “real world” in a way that is mutually exclusive, requiring one to choose between the two realms. Despite their own success within the rural community, multiple participants suggested success and opportunity existed “out there” and expressed success for students as “leaving,” often framing outcomes in terms of here or there and often in a way that suggested an either or decision. Additionally, multiple participants commented on a lack of permeation into the rural community, noting how few outsiders move into the community, as well as the minimal attention paid to the rural community by broader society, and when Robert discussed his own son who is now in college outside the community he assured me “he won’t be back.” These expressed beliefs seem to suggest that one cannot inhabit both spaces or comfortably move back and forth between them, a belief that would seem to align with an internalization of peripheral status and one may influence other beliefs regarding the likelihood and possibility of particular outcomes.

**Considering Adaptations**

The second dimension of the theoretical framework considers beliefs in relation to adaptations. Sen (1999) theorized that perceptions of agency were influenced by individuals’ and communities’ understandings of culture and society and that often
expectations of self and world were modified to accommodate these beliefs. This is particularly relevant to rural education, where beliefs about rurality could be emphasizing deficits, deprivation, and perceptions of vulnerability to larger, economical and societal forces, contributing to what Teschl and Comim (2005) described as a tendency towards adaptive preferences “deformed” by negative beliefs and experiences (p. 229). As explained by Watts, et al. (2008), Sen’s conception of adaptive preferences highlights tendencies towards “self-abnegation” and a “renunciation” of “aspirations for a better life” through the internalization of external constraints (p. 1). According to this theory conceptions of what is possible and what is considered an acceptable outcome are shaped by one’s perceptions of external variables rather than what one might desire or envision without those constraints. In the context of marginalized populations or communities, these adapted understandings of possibility and expectation often omit the “big dreams” discussed by Guarjardo, et al. (2016), as certain aspirations are often perceived as unlikely or impossible and aspirations and expectations are thus adapted to accommodate these beliefs about one’s place in the world. Considering rural education in relation to this theory, Sen’s frame provided a means of considering the ways in which such beliefs may be contributing to both individual and collective adaptations related to the perceived utility of education, the identification of aspirations and aims, and expectations of instructional impact and ultimately student outcomes.

When considered in relation to the theory of adaptive preferences, the previously described core-peripheral boundaries and the here versus there tensions observed in the data would seem to align with Sen’s theorized tension between aspiration and adaptation. Participants expressed hope for students, a belief in educators’ ability to be a positive
influence in students’ lives by way of relationships, and a desire to positively impact student outcomes, yet most also expressed doubt in the likelihood that any of these would truly alter long-term outcomes for most students. Tia, for instance commented that she believes she has “some impact,” but “a lot of times though their mind is already made up, or they feel like they don’t have the opportunity to do something else,” and Betsy grimly noted, “I just don’t feel like education can impact.” Kyla similarly commented that she “hopes” she has an impact, but then expressed a belief that her impact on long-term outcomes was likely limited to a small number of students who came from a particular type of family or had a particular background. These tensions between desire and perceived probability undoubtedly shape what participants view as possible or, at the very least, likely and thus shape their perception of themselves and students. When asked where they see their students in the future, all participants responded that they anticipated most students would stay locally, which was typically attributed to students’ lack of awareness of the “outside world,” not being able to see “what’s out there,” and local cultural values that would inhibit their likelihood of success beyond the local community. While participants acknowledged that a few students may leave the community, the aforementioned observations regarding conceptions of one-way permeation, suggest that perceptions of possibility are often framed as a here-versus-there, zero-sum game.

These conceptions of rurality and rural education would seem to support Sen’s theory of adaptive preferences, which contends that many in marginalized contexts adapt to unfavorable circumstances by accepting certain conditions or outcomes as given and evaluating their own satisfaction and possibility through the lens of these adaptations. These adaptations can often produce distorted assessments of self and others that neglect
actual functionings and capabilities. In the case of participants, the data suggest some prevailing adaptations and assessments both in relation to self and in relation to students and families. First, data related to conceptions of success embodied strong tensions related place, as well as status. For more than half of participants, despite their own success within the rural community, success for students was “out there,” but few expressed a belief that students would realize this success. A minority of participants who presented success in more local terms often indicated a belief that students had skewed perceptions of “out there” and would eventually learn, as Tom suggested “that it isn’t all good.” There were also tensions related to whether or not success was defined in terms of academic paths or labor and trade. Regardless of whether or not participants defined student success in terms of entering the local workforce or in terms of academic paths, there seemed to be an acceptance that the rural community was not academic, which appeared to impact their expectations regarding the utility of education, instructional impact, and long-term student outcomes. Participants seemed to perceive students and families as having specific adaptive preferences that renounce certain possibilities, particularly those related to academic paths. Furthermore, they seemed to believe, as described by Teschl and Comim (2005), that these adaptations are “deformed” by understandings of external constraints and their conceptions of their relationship to the world (p. 229).

Interestingly, these expressed beliefs regarding the adaptations of those they serve may also suggest participants’ own adaptations, as participants repeatedly expressed an acceptance of these perceived constraints regarding students and their outcomes, presenting these constraints as an immutable condition of rural education. However, to
return to the concept of evaluating one’s own satisfaction and possibility through the lens of adaptations, participants’ beliefs and conceptions of rurality would also seem to emphasize a positive adaptation—community and relationships. Throughout the interview and focus group data all participants stressed the importance of relationships and the ways in which small, rural schools are positioned to develop and nurture meaningful connections with students. Although adaptive preferences have perhaps enabled participants to de-emphasize certain academic outcomes through external attribution to a nonacademic community, the recognition of the role of relationships within this community suggests a positive aspiration. Shae’s assertion that she “knows” she has impact because of the relationships she forms with students, Robert’s emphasis on getting to know students, Tom’s focus on the school as a community center, Betsy’s description of rural schools as families, Tia’s insistence that rural schools offer unique opportunities to understand community, and Kyla’s positive recounting of the ways in which rural teachers are able to care and take a vested interest in students all support relationship-building as a focal point in rural education. Perhaps the prevailing impact aspiration among participants is the nurturing of those relationships, a finding that may point to a potential strength to be considered and leveraged.

**Considering Efficacy**

The third facet of the theoretical framework explores efficacy. While beliefs about rurality that have been internalized and reproduced could potentially be influencing individual and collective adaptations, specifically those related to perceived agency and possibility, these adaptations may also connect to perceptions of efficacy both within and without the school. As these belief centered assumptions can, as explained by Tschannen-
Moran, et al. (1998), influence “thought patterns and emotions that enable actions” (p. 206). Those who believe that environment overwhelms their ability to impact outcomes may perceive significantly less efficacy than those who believe these outcomes are within their control (Tschannen-Moran, et al.). These beliefs, however, relate to perceptions rather than actual ability, and in this way local narratives and conceptions of rurality may be contributing to a collective underestimation of actual capacities, a point particularly significant to understanding rural contexts. Perceived efficacy, according to Tschannen-Moran, et al. (1998), “affects the effort they put into teaching, the goals they set, and their level of aspiration” (p. 216), an effect that seems closely related to Sen’s concept of adaptive preferences.

Efficacy is of interest not just at the individual level, but at the collective level as well, as teachers’ beliefs about the ability of the school as a whole repeatedly have been correlated to student achievement (Donohoo, et al., 2018). Research suggests that when expectations for success are high, educators work with greater “persistence and strong resolve,” but when educators’ perceptions are “filtered through the belief that there is very little they can do to influence student achievement, negative beliefs pervade the school culture” (p. 42). Beliefs regarding a lack of agency can become “a solemn satisfaction with the status quo” in which “school communities experience an inclination to stop trying” (p. 42). Furthermore, low levels of collective efficacy have been also been connected to an increased tendency to shift responsibility for student outcomes to external forces, often creating what Donohoo, et al. described as “an “us” versus “them” mentality” (p. 42). This bifurcated perception in regard to educators’ sense of agency and
efficacy may prove significant to understanding rural education since these tensions were evidenced in the patterns and themes that emerged in the data. Of particular interest when examining the data through this lens, was that perceptions of possibility emerged as adaptations distinct from teacher efficacy, particularly in terms of participants’ perceptions of their instructional abilities. Although efficacy data revealed varying levels of perceived overall teacher efficacy between participants, as well as varied levels of perceived overall collective efficacy, in general participants reported a greater sense of efficacy in regard to instructional strategies and classroom management skills. Adaptive preferences and efficacy do, however, seem to intersect at the point of student outcomes. As noted in the analysis of outlying items, low scoring items were repeated across participants. On the TSTE, the item regarding teacher’s ability to “get through to the most difficult students” was an outlying low score for four of the six participants, while the item related to assisting families and the item related to motivating uninterested students were outlying low scores for three of six participants. CTES data contained similar patterns with outlying items related to student behaviors and beliefs. For instance, the item related to school personnel’s collectively ability “to get students to believe they can do well in schoolwork” was an outlying low-scoring item for three of six participants. These data suggest that while beliefs about rurality may not diminish teachers’ belief in their own understanding of content and their ability to instruct students in this content, beliefs about rurality and possibility may be impacting their perceptions of individual and collective ability to affect student outcomes. As previously noted, research suggests that when expectations for success are high, educators work with greater “persistence and strong resolve” (Donohoo, et al., 2018
p. 42), and, similar to the impact of adaptive preferences, beliefs regarding a lack of agency for both teachers and students can become “a solemn satisfaction with the status quo” (p. 42). Given this potential impact on school culture and in turn, instruction and student experiences, these findings must be considered. Furthermore, low levels of efficacy have been also been connected to an increased tendency to shift responsibility for student outcomes to external forces, which as noted above can result in an “us versus them” conception of rural education. This tension was particularly noticeable in the emergent themes identified in the data, especially in participants’ discussion of students and rural education. Interestingly, the oppositional “them” in the data shifted between families and caregivers—as evidenced by Betsy’s claim that poor student outcomes are “generational” and “has to do with their background—no value of education, no support, no goals for the future” and Tia’s assertion that “families don’t value education”; cultural values—as evidenced by Robert and Tom’s emphasis on a bootstrapper mentality; and the external forces of broader society, epitomized by the repeated peripheral positioning of both students and community. In each instance, with the exception of Shae, participants, despite efficacious beliefs about their instructional abilities, expressed limited confidence in their agency and/or ability regarding student behaviors and outcomes.

This us versus them mentality in all its conceptions would seem to support Azano and Stewart’s (2016) theory suggesting that a perceived lack of agency can further entrench rural communities in peripheral identities and in turn contribute to the perpetuation of hegemonic narratives that undermine potential, and may serve as evidence that rural educators unwittingly “reproduce existing social systems and
reinforce deficit narratives, class divisions, and power relations” (Moffa & McHenry-Sorber, 2018, p. 27). For instance, Betsy, Kyla, and Tia, all expressed an almost fatalistic view of student outcomes in which they held little agency over generational, familial, and cultural influences and in which the measure of impact and the measure of student outcomes was often success outside the local community, beliefs that would seem to embody imagined, yet historically observed, core-periphery boundaries and could contribute to a deficit-oriented culture, as well as perpetuate rural stereotypes. Additionally, the majority of participants also lamented the perceived low value placed on education by families in the community, as well as students’ lack of engagement, often citing a disconnect between the rural community and broader society as contributing to these perceived challenges. This was particularly observable in participants’ references to visibility and students and families not seeing “out there” and thus, also not seeing the value of education. Kyla, for example, stated “They don’t see this stuff, so they're not going to have an interest in school,” and similarly Tom commented that “students are naïve to the outside world and lack awareness of what’s out there.”

These comments suggest the tension embodied in the us versus them and here versus there mentality, as they seem to highlight the premium placed on outside knowledge by some rural educators, specifically as it relates to student success and the relevance of school, yet these comments often stand at odds with the local ways of being that are clearly valued by the participants—community, strong relationships, and the perceived safety from the ills of broader society. These tensions may speak to Azano and Biddle’s (2019) observation that rural schools are often sites of paradoxes and false
dichotomies that influence the ways in which rural students and educators perceive themselves and their relationship to global knowledge and that contribute to a banking model of education that perpetuates rural students’ and educators’ peripheral positioning. Given this emphasis on the disconnect between school and lived experiences, as well as the value all participants placed on community and the educational strengths that accompany that community, the data may suggest a need to better leverage the wisdom and wealth of that community through more community-centered epistemologies that facilitate critical discourse, increased asset-based narratives, and a revision of limiting beliefs, as these revisions may support more culturally responsive approaches that better serve students and community. Freire’s (2009) theory of critical pedagogy may thus provide a useful lens for further understanding these dynamics and identifying a productive means forward.

**Considering a Critical Pedagogy of Place**

Freire (2009) argued that educators can work to shift core-periphery dynamics and in turn conceptions of what is by possible by engaging with local knowledge and leveraging the power and wisdom of place. He asserted that those who have been historically oppressed or marginalized must come to recognize their situations “not as a closed world from which there is no exit, but as a limiting situation which they can transform” (p. 47). This transformation, much as Sen theorized, hinges on a shift away from limiting and often distorted beliefs to more accurate assessments of capabilities. For Freire these capabilities were inherent within the strengths of community. His proposed solution was not an integration into traditional structures but rather a transformation of epistemologies to emphasize both love and agency, suggesting a critical problem-posing pedagogy
grounded in community-centered dialogue as a means to liberation. As Miller, et al. (2011) asserted, “…dialogue centers the contextual expertise of the people as active advocates for social transformation” and positions communities and the schools that serve them “to instigate authentic change directed at widespread humanization” because it emphasizes the “inherent capabilities of all people to name their realities and transform them” (Miller, et al., 2011, p.1083). Through problem-driven inquiry and dialogue—specifically inquiry and dialogue centered on place and the lived realities of the participants—all participants become “jointly responsible for a process in which all grow” (Freire, 2009, p. 80). As Azano and Biddle (2019) noted, Freire’s framework may provide useful context for understanding the contextual tensions in rural schools and communities and a lens for considering the ways in which standardized global knowledge is delivered to educators, as well as to students by educators, both of whom may identify themselves as peripheral to this knowledge, creating a dichotomy between these human beings and the world and potentially leading to the internalization of deficit narratives and of their role as spectators rather than powerful actors.

Furthermore, Freire’s process of inquiry and dialogue, which he described as a “process of becoming” (2009, p. 84), may serve as the framework for responding to belief-based challenges in rural education, as the process of inquiry and the internalization of perpetually becoming suggests a potential means of revising beliefs. To return to Peircean fixation, Peirce asserted that inquiry was central to the testing and revision of beliefs and advocated an ongoing examination grounded in a “dedication to the dialectic” (Peirce as cited in Kaag, 2012, p. 522). As Cunningham, et al. (2005) argued, “change of belief requires that we know what things are worth believing and
what things need to be set aside” (p.187), and “fostering an increased comfort with doubt, abduction, and experimentation is paramount” (p. 188). Examining beliefs and instructional decisions in this light may provide a means of identifying their limiting impact on current classroom practices, while identifying ways to engage teachers and students in problem-based critical inquiry and ongoing dialogue may provide a path towards improving outcomes for rural educators and students. Critical dialogue that engages with the local culture, economy, and politics, may prove a means of countering dichotomies with “counternarratives of hope that challenge the master modernist narratives” and “disrupt the core-periphery dichotomy,” reframing the rural experience and situating it within the broader, global context (Azano & Biddle, 2019, p.6).

The conceptualization of this process, initially presented in figure 1, is revisited in figure 25 with the prevalent beliefs, adaptations, and efficacy concerns suggested by the study’s findings added to the previously presented framework. As depicted in the left arm of the diagram, prevailing beliefs, such as the internalization of peripheral status, perceptions of here versus there and us versus them tensions, and the various values and attributions embedded in these tensions, may be contributing to adaptive preferences—particularly the renunciation of certain possibilities and outcomes, the perpetuation peripheral boundaries, and conceptions of one-way permeability, as presented in the top arm. In turn these adaptations would seem to correlate with perceived efficacy related to impacting student outcomes, as they enable a bifurcated conceptualization of efficacy in which outcomes are removed from instruction (presented in the right arm of figure 25). However, by engaging in critical pedagogy and critical dialogue that leverages the community and local wisdom and works to increase perceptions of rural agency, beliefs
about rurality may be revised, adaptations altered, and efficacy improved. By embracing Freire’s ongoing “process of becoming,” this cycle of inquiry becomes recursive, allowing for continuous revision and refinement of both beliefs and outcomes, and as Cunningham, et al. (2005) assert, perhaps by fostering this disposition in teachers, they will be “more capable of fostering that same disposition in their students” (p.188).
Note. Figure 25 presents the theoretical framework first presented in Chapter 2. This version has been updated to include beliefs, adaptations, and efficacy perceptions that emerged in the data.
**Implications**

Through the lens of this theoretical framework, the findings of this study suggest a need to identify and address beliefs about rurality, as well as more fully engage the community in the revision of these beliefs. The nature of the prevailing beliefs expressed, however, suggest a variety of implications related to language, systems, families, and place that should be considered in this process of revision. The following sections present and discuss these considerations in relation to the study’s findings.

**Belief Revision**

Despite valuing the community and recognizing the richness of the relationships fostered in the rural setting, participants’ tendency toward external attribution and their discussions of students, families, and success, as well as the perceived limitations expressed regarding their ability to impact outcomes, suggest that in both speech and belief some educators are reproducing “existing social systems” and reinforcing “deficit narratives, class divisions, and power relations” (Moffa & McHenry-Sorber, 2018, p. 27). Although confident in their relationships and their instructional abilities, most expressed a perceived lack of agency related to student outcomes and in many statements seemed to subscribe to peripheral identities and hegemonic narratives. Therefore, the path forward may require strategic efforts to address the internalization of peripheral identities and to center the strengths of rurality in the narratives told, particularly in the stories we tell about students, families, and possibility. To return to Cunningham, et al. (2005), “change of belief requires that we know what things are worth believing and what things need to be set aside” (p.187), and given the findings of this study, it would seem that while rural educators hold beliefs worth believing, particularly those that acknowledge the strengths
of rurality, there are limiting beliefs that impede agency and perceptions of possibility that must be set aside. This work of identifying and building agency is key to improving outcomes in small, rural communities.

For educators whose aims should be effectively serving our students and opening up and supporting possibilities, the data suggest an immediate need for engaging in processes of inquiry aimed at belief revision. This inquiry should work to refine understandings of the various contexts that shape students’ experiences, as well as their own, and it should recognize educators’ culpability in the reproduction of current inequities. Classroom teachers are primary points of contact for students and families, as well as facilitators of student learning, and, consciously or unconsciously, beliefs about rurality and possibility inevitably shape the work they do. DeMatthews (2018) described these belief driven adaptations as “cultural baggage” (p. 128), and asserted that educators must be deliberate in working to address this baggage by engaging authentic efforts to understand the influence of both individual and collective “cultural baggage,” particularly as it relates to our understandings of the broader community, students’ lived experience, and possibility that exists in rural contexts. Those in leadership positions, be it administrators, team leads, or mentors, must work to engage colleagues in this process of inquiry and work to shape conversations in a way that will support a reframing and belief revision because beliefs and the decisions they inform contribute to the educational milieu of the school community.

**Language Revision**

One consideration that emerged through the analysis of the data is the use of language. Language is a key component of framing and attribution because it is
foundational to our understandings of the world and our experiences in it. Language is a means by which beliefs about education, about students and families, and about rurality are fixed, communicated, and reinforced—be it intentionally or unintentionally. As Lakoff and Johnson (2003) explained, language and its metaphors can “structure how we perceive, how we think, and what we do” (p. 4). It is a “mechanism of mind” that shapes our understandings without our even being aware of the processes at work. Because of this, patterns of language hold immense power. They undoubtedly contribute to our conceptions of self and our relationship to the world, as well as the conceptions of our students and others with whom we interact, which is why it is imperative that educators consider how they are wielding language in educational contexts.

One of the most pervasive patterns of language to emerge in the data was the language of out there. As noted in Chapter 4 this language appeared both as an abstract reference, as well as a more literal spatial reference, but in all its forms, it appeared divisive in its clear separation of here (the rural community) and there (everywhere else). At times it appeared to carry an almost neutral connotation, while at other times this separation was clearly conceived as a negative, but only rarely did this phrase seem to connote a strength in separation, even if those who used the phrase frequently alluded to that strength in other contexts. These beliefs or at least their expression seem contradictory, raising questions regarding the impact of potentially mixed messaging. Even if educators speak to students in terms of possibility and goal setting, what does this seemingly innocuous, but pervasive, linguistic tendency communicate to students? How does it relate to conceptions of outsider status? How might it function in terms of undermining perceptions of possibility, and how is it being internalized by students? As
Lakoff and Johnson (2003) noted, language reveals the conceptual systems that govern thought and action. If rural educators are to overcome peripheral identities, dispel deeply rooted myths of limitation, and leverage the strength of rurality, then it would seem necessary that the language used around rurality be reconsidered.

Another area in which language should be considered is in relation to attribution. The data suggest that a majority of participants believe that student outcomes can be largely attributed to students themselves rather than to school culture, instructional choices, and the supports made available. In conversation, these beliefs often appeared in the form of bootstrapper language. Although perhaps well-intended and meant to encourage, the frequent repetition of phrases, such as “it’s a matter of effort,” “you get what you put into it,” or “they don’t have any internal drive,” work to shift blame and responsibility for educational outcomes to students, suggesting that challenges and failures in their educational endeavors are a result of their own deficits and shortcomings. This type of language emphasizes lack and presents students as flawed. If these beliefs and the corresponding language are prevalent across a school community, then students may be encountering such messaging repeatedly, making this language a means of belief fixation that can alter their perceptions of themselves, their abilities, and what are reasonable expectations and aspirations.

Similarly, the language around families and caregivers should also be examined, as the data suggest this too may be emphasizing deficits and contributing to conceptions of families that are structured around perceived flaws. Throughout the interview and focus group data, challenges to student outcomes were presented as generational, and families were depicted as absent, not caring, or “not valuing education.” Given the
frequency these references appeared in connection to impact and student outcomes, it would seem this sort of external attribution is a prevailing belief within the school community and one that is reinforced through common language. This is undoubtedly problematic. When such beliefs are prevalent within a school or system, particularly when they reinforced through language, these perceptions can become the prevailing frame for action, or in the case of external attribution, inaction. As Coburn (2006) demonstrated, these frames can legitimize deficit thinking and delegitimizing agency, as perceptions of a problem and the thinking behind these perceptions can prevent the recognition of certain other variables and in turn solutions.

**Beliefs About Poverty**

This language around rural families and the beliefs it reveals also raises questions regarding the misconceptions educators hold about families, particularly those considered economically disadvantaged. As Paul Gorksy asserted in his article “The Myth of the Culture of Poverty” (2008)—an article that seems particularly relevant given that the school in which the study was conducted (and many rural schools) serves a high number of students identified as economically disadvantaged—beliefs about families and caregivers are often inaccurate and grounded in biases and stereo-types. He noted that although many educators maintain that “Poor parents are uninvolved in their children's learning, largely because they do not value education,” in reality, many “hold the same attitudes about education that wealthy parents do,” and their seeming absence in school affairs is not because “they care less about education, but because they have less access to school involvement than their wealthier peers” (p. 33), a claim repeatedly substantiated by a growing body educational research. Thus, it is imperative that educators consider the
ways in which they speak of families and caregivers, the ways in which language may be reinforcing biases and stereotypes, the ways in which these biases and stereotypes may be impacting action—how we frame challenges, the improvement efforts used to address the challenges—and the ways students experience and perceive these actions. “It might be said more accurately,” explained Gorsky, “that schools that fail to take these considerations into account do not value the involvement of poor families as much as they value the involvement of other families” (p. 33).

**Considering Hidden Curricula**

These conceptions of rural families and students raise another consideration that must be accounted for when examining beliefs about students, families, and their relationship to educational outcomes, this being the role of hidden curricula. In *Educational Politics for Social Justice*, Marshall, et al. (2020) discuss the ways in which professional culture and hidden or informal curricula, which encompasses the language of schools, the processes traditionally utilized within them, and prevailing school-centric attitudes and expectations, often reinforce biased or discriminatory norms that ultimately privilege middle class white students and cause those who are not part of this privileged class to view school as a compromise of their own culture and a sort of forced assimilation oppositional to the values, ideals, and language of their homes and communities. Although primarily white, the students of Belkin often reflect cultures that differ from those dominating educational settings. While rural educators, by way of formal education and experience working within these larger educational systems, have been initiated into this professional school culture, according to Marshall, et al. uninitiated students and families may perceive school as an institution that fails to
acknowledge the value of their language, traditions, and nonacademic knowledge stores. This devaluing of local experience within the educational culture of broader society can increase the likelihood that school is perceived as a mandated task to complete in order to move into adulthood but one with no real connection to their lives outside of school, and this likelihood may speak to the prevalence of belief patterns regarding students’ and families’ lack of awareness and educational aspirations, as well as beliefs about valuing education.

Furthermore, this informal curriculum and its disconnect from the lived experiences of students and families can also contribute to and perpetuate inequitable power dynamics, often working to exclude certain voices and maintain certain traditions, and it would seem plausible that these traditional exclusions and preferences within schools are contributing to the deficit-oriented perceptions of and beliefs about rural students and families. Marshall, et al. (2020) discusses this influence as “sociocultural molding” through informal curriculum (p. 40), while Fowler (2013) calls attention to the ways in which these dynamics contribute to a “mobilization of bias” directly related to class (p. 32) and references that “the shaping of consciousness” as one of the primary dimensions of power (p. 35). Both, however, emphasize a disconnect between the individual experiences and cultures of certain student populations and the predominant school culture, asserting that this devaluing of students’ and families’ identities is form of disempowerment. Interestingly, both Marshall, et al. and Fowler stress the role of language in this process of disempowerment and identified these uses of power as so engrained in the system and educational tradition that they are often taken for granted and operate for some at an almost unconscious level. Therefore, if rural educators are to truly
address fixated beliefs and adaptations and meet the needs of students in rural contexts, it will be necessary to consider the role of these ingrained dynamics on the beliefs and assumptions of both educators and those they serve, as well as the role of these variables in school processes.

*The Significance of Place*

One potential means of addressing these dynamics and the disconnect between standardized school cultures and local experience is to consider the significance of place within rural communities. As interview data suggest and Biddle, et al. (2018) observed in their study of a rural school and community collaboratives, rural schools often experience tension between community culture and institutional aims. Furthermore, Biddle, et al. reported that many schools struggle to leverage local culture as an educational asset because there is sense of distrust between institutions and the communities they serve often rising from perceived “insiderness” and attitudes towards outsiders. This issue of trust is described by Walsh (2012) as a “rural consciousness” in which there is a seeming distrust of systems affiliated with cities and city-centered government, largely because these spaces have been experienced as agents of peripheralization. Furthermore, Schafft (2016) asserted that there is often a particular distrust of higher education as it is perceived as having little relevance to rural ways of living and often prepares students for careers not visible in the rural community and thus contributes to out migration from the community, a point which may speak to at least some of the tensions that emerged in the data of this study.

The ways in which participants characterized families and their beliefs regarding families’ lack of awareness and value for education, the ways in which participants
conceptualized success and particular student outcomes, and the prevalence of us versus
them and here versus there dichotomies throughout the data suggest these tensions and
rural consciousness are at work in Belkin. As Biddle, et al. (2018) suggest, these tensions
may arise from the fact that while schools are part of the local context, they are also part
of a state and national network, which makes them subject to external pressures. These
external pressures, however, may result in a failure to consider community development
and community concerns when envisioning school improvement. “Pressure to produce
gains in testing,” explained Biddle, et al., “may encourage educators to retreat toward the
goals and objectives of the institution, rather than seeing schools as part of a larger
community ecology with an obligation to the wellbeing of both community and school”
(p. 3). The researchers further asserted that rural schools in particular are prone to
experiencing a “lack of alignment between organizational imperatives and locally derived
needs” (p. 5), as educational institutions tend to privilege institutional ways of knowing.

It is, therefore, imperative, particularly for rural schools where much of their
identity as a school and much of the identity of those they serve is tied to geographic
location, that the significance of place be considered. Schools have complex relationships
with the communities in which they are situated, as they are simultaneously part of
interconnected local, national, and global systems. These systems, however, do not
necessarily value local spaces, nor do they prioritize the viability of local culture or local
communities. As Biddle, et al. noted, in many instances educators who are successful at
meeting institutional aims may actually be “preparing young people for work and lives
that will not enhance their home community’s wellbeing” (p. 5). Considering this
relationship and how to recenter local spaces may be key to improving outcomes for rural schools and the communities they serve.

**Leveraging Community**

Given the aforementioned considerations, creating a space for community and the lived experiences of rural students and their families may prove a powerful next step for improvement. Although the data revealed a number of limiting beliefs shared across participants of the study, it also revealed a clear valuing of relationships. As previously noted, nurturing relationships within the school was identified as a positive adaptation, and each of the participants expressed a strong belief in the potential of connections within the rural setting. This positive adaptation is perhaps one the great advantages of rural education, a strength to be leveraged in the inquiry towards belief revision. A more holistic engagement of community stakeholders both within and without the school may enable educators to better understand the sociohistorical contexts shaping school-community dynamics, utilize these understandings in the revision of limiting beliefs, and in turn, better recognize and leverage the assets of the community. As Guajardo, et al. (2016) described, many of these communities and the individuals who comprise them often do “not see their story as source of personal power or as an asset” (p. 14), but community engagement that emphasizes narrative and dialogue provides a means for understanding our stories and our communities in “radically different ways” (p.15), ways that capture successes, strengths, cultural richness, and local assets and work to counter the dominant deficit narratives—a process the researchers identify as a “critical prerequisite to being to rehabilitate the collective self-esteem of many communities” (p. 57). True community engagement “recognizes and honors the work of elders and other
who work to raise families, create enterprises, and lead institutions in the community” and “offers opportunities to engage organizations and communities in gaining a deeper understanding of the strengths” that exist in their communities (Guajardo, et al., 2016, p. 57), and this rebuilding of collective self-esteem seems a direct link to the beliefs, adaptations, and efficacy of both school and community, particularly in rural communities where hegemonic deficit narratives have been internalized.

Furthermore, this process of sharing and engaging across traditional school centric boundaries and the understandings gained from this process can open up new possibilities for both communities and the schools that serve them. As noted by Khalifa (2020), listening to community voices and experiences enables educators to “establish positive rapport and trusting relationships with communities,” as well as “overlapping spaces” (p. 192), which can serve to shift “historically school-based power to communities” (p. 49). This shift works to build a community and organization’s capacity for change, as well as educators’ capacity for more culturally responsive pedagogy because such approaches “value people and tend to identify and build the agency they bring with them” (Guajardo, et al., 2016, p. 5), and research suggests this commitment to place-based agency is key to improving outcomes in small, rural communities (Azano & Biddle, 2019; Azano & Stewart, 2016; Biddle, et al., 2018; Lavalley, 2018; Mette, 2014. It can inform practice that is grounded in the lived experiences of students, allowing educational communities to build “critical thinking, writing, and other communication skills through careful study of people, events, and significant entities located in the community” (Guajardo, et al., 2016, p. 17). By “liberating our schema from the traditional roles and responsibilities of unidirectional power” (Guajardo, et al., p.46), we are better positioned to both construct
and deconstruct narratives, rethink and reframe, and provide a path to identifying and building upon existing assets rather than focusing on deficits. Beliefs about rurality may be revised, adaptations altered, and efficacy improved. By embracing the ongoing “process of becoming” (Freire, 2009), we can engage in a revision and refinement of both beliefs and outcomes and foster dispositions of inquiry and possibility in our students, educators, and their communities.

This link between practice and community is inextricable and is an essential consideration in rural education—not only as a matter of school improvement but as a matter of ethical leadership, as traditional dynamics can impede empowerment and hinder truly democratic processes within rural schools, consequently failing both individual students and the communities in which they live. It is imperative that rural educators consider the ethical ramifications of these dynamics and seek courses of action that will leverage the strengths and assets of their communities and create cooperative contexts in which all students and families are truly served. They must engage the local community, identify the community’s beliefs about rurality and education, and understand the long-standing historical narratives that shape beliefs—those of the community, as well as their own—and they must recognize the ways in which these beliefs influence perceptions of agency and possibility and in turn stifle or enable action.

Recommendations

While this community-centered approach may hold promise for rural communities in general, it seems particularly applicable to Belkin School. Located in a small rural village of approximately 384 people, Belkin serves a community steeped in history and local tradition. Be it the community’s rich history of service, its small but generous local
businesses, or the diverse human capital of its residents, the community is replete with assets. My experiences in the community suggest local residents are eager to share their stories of resilience and strength, as well as showcase unique offerings such as local farms, the nationally recognized Quaker settlement and its various sustainability initiatives, and the wealth of wildlife and natural spaces that surround the village. They take great pride in local history and are quick to point out their successes and struggles, suggesting a community ready to engage if given opportunities to do so. Furthermore, the educators who participated in this study expressed a clear belief in the power of relationships, unanimously identifying relationships and community as one of the defining positive attributes of the rural experience. Despite perceptions of peripheralization, evidence of fatalistic beliefs, and a seemingly limited sense of opportunity, participants consistently communicated the inherent strength of a small, “close-knit” community, repeatedly identifying community and relationships as one of their greatest assets. It would, therefore make sense that a more asset-driven approach begin with the asset most readily identified. Thus, the proposed course of action seeks to leverage community and the relationship potential of these contexts.

As noted in the preceding sections, although proud of their school and confident in their relationships with students, the majority of participants appear to hold a variety of limiting beliefs about rurality, as well as about students and families, and these beliefs appear to be impacting their sense of impact and their beliefs regarding long-term student outcomes. Furthermore, data suggested a disconnect between school and students’ lived experiences, embodied in discussions of values, awareness, engagement, and ability to impact outcomes. By centering community, however, educators can work to revise their
understandings of the community they serve and reorient beliefs around community strengths and assets, while facilitating increased connections between school and the lived experiences of students and stakeholders.

The following assumptions undergird these recommendations: schools are community centers that impact both educational and community outcomes; it is the responsibility of a school to engage and understand the beliefs and behaviors of both educators and the community; education is a community issue and collaboration with communities can improve outcomes for all stakeholders; communities possess cultural wealth and wisdom and are uniquely positioned to inform and contribute to educational outcomes; and purposeful communication and collaboration is an important component of the improvement process. Objectives of these recommendations include the facilitation of belief revision through increased school-community partnerships, improved perceptions/beliefs regarding school-community relationships, a shared vision for school-community outcomes, community-informed policy and practice that reflects this shared vision, a more comprehensive application of place-based pedagogies, and a more equitable and inclusive school-community collaboration capable of producing improved student and community outcomes. Achieving these aims at a systems level will undoubtedly require buy-in, as well as the concerted efforts and ongoing contributions of the school community, but it can begin with individuals in their educational space.

**Individual Work**

At the individual level, educators can first and foremost examine their own beliefs and consider how these beliefs are communicated, intentionally or unintentionally, to students and families. As previously discussed, language is a vehicle for communicating
our beliefs, but it also plays a significant role in how we conceptualize the world around us and engages us and those with whom we communicate in the processes of belief formation and fixation. We must consider the cultural baggage that we bring into our educational spaces and the ways in which that baggage shapes interactions that occur there. One of the most impressive aspects of this study was the opportunity to look at transcripts and examine how we use language and the patterns that emerge. Although many of the identified patterns are incredibly common—the divisive us versus them, the ubiquitous “out there,” or the almighty “real world”—these patterns create artificial boundaries. Sometimes these verbalized boundaries separate families from schools, sometimes teachers from students, and sometimes rural students from other students, but the most common of these perceived boundaries separated what transpires in rural communities and rural schools from “out there.”

This language of peripheralization, which appeared repeatedly in the transcripts, likely also appears in classrooms, and while this language may work to perpetuate conceptions of rurality as being separate from the real world, it also creates a very clear distinction between what happens in classrooms and what happens in real life. If we are going to lament that students fail to see the relevancy of their academic work and fail to see its applications beyond the classroom, then perhaps we should consider the ways in which we frame learning and the messages we send to students. I suspect this language pattern is far more common than just a rural problem and that these expressions are more ubiquitous than just rural communities, but in a rural context, given geographic positioning and the complex history of hegemonic narratives that often inhabit these spaces, the idea of out there and the artificial boundaries it creates seem to take on a
deeper, more nuanced meaning that may be communicating inherent limitations to our students rather than the inherent strengths of the rural experience. It is, therefore, imperative that we consider our beliefs, consider how those beliefs shape language, and how language may shape action, as well as the beliefs of those around us, and revise accordingly.

This revision of beliefs could foster greater sensitivity to local needs and ways of knowing and turn more culturally responsive dispositions, and educators with culturally responsive dispositions are uniquely positioned to challenge narratives and resist “the dichotomies of school success or failure within the narrowly designed sphere of educational policy” (Azano & Biddle, 2019, p. 7). Through a critical pedagogy of place, educators may be able to “upend the core-periphery model, assuming the core to be the rural place itself” (Azano & Biddle, 2019, p. 7), and data suggest this approach works. A recent implementation in one Appalachian school district was linked to improved critical thinking and attitudes towards learning and reportedly yielded a 100% pass rate on state assessments—an unexpected outcome given the district’s previously poor performance and high rates of poverty (Lavalley, 2018). By integrating standard curriculum requirements within a framework that embraces rurality and the rural community, educators can create relevant learning environments for rural students.

This work can certainly begin with personal reflection and an examination of individual practice, but so much of what we believe and perpetuate is bound up in our conceptions of our world and those conceptions are often transmitted collectively through narrative and dialogue. Peirce asserted that inquiry was central to the testing and revision of beliefs and advocated an ongoing examination grounded in a “dedication to the
dialectic” (Peirce as cited in Kaag, 2012, p. 522), while Cunningham, et al. (2005) argued for “fostering an increased comfort with doubt, abduction, and experimentation” (p. 188). Examining beliefs in this light may provide a means of identifying their limiting impact, but identifying ways to engage in problem-based critical inquiry and ongoing dialogue that truly engages with local culture and may provide a path forward. Critical dialogue that recognizes the significance of place, centers community, and works to reframe the ways in which rurality and rural education are conceptualized may prove a means of countering historical narratives with new narratives that “disrupt the core-periphery dichotomy,” reframing the rural experience and situating it within the broader, global context (Azano & Biddle, 2019, p.6).

**Collective Work**

This critical dialogue and centering of community is the collective work that must be done. Readiness for change, however, must be cultivated at the cultural level, and a more deliberate and purposeful engagement with the community and their concerns may provide the means to this cultivation. All participants expressed a sense of pride in their community and the relationships it fosters. Moving forward it is imperative that we learn to better leverage these relationships as a means of mutual improvement and shift from schoolcentric approaches to more community-engaged pedagogies. We must refine our understanding of community and examine how we live that understanding, with particular attention to those in the periphery; we must maximize our “community center” status by inviting the community in further and creating spaces that help strengthen our ties and relationships; and most importantly we must effectively position families for
involvement in all facets of the school community, clearly communicating messages of inclusiveness, pride, and belonging.

One model for this sort of engagement is Everyday Democracy’s (2019) Dialogue to Change community engagement model. This approach to community engagement involves bringing diverse groups of stakeholders together to take part in activities that build trust and provide opportunities to share, learn about local and school issues, and work together on solutions and action. Adaptations of the program’s “Theory of Equitable Collaboration” and action framework are presented in figures 26 and 27 (Everyday Democracy, 2019).

**Figure 26**

*Theory of Equitable Community Collaboration*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Community Capacity</th>
<th>Authentic Relationships</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Develop both individual and collective capacity for collaboration and school improvement</td>
<td>• Build trust, communication, collaborative attitudes, and shared visions for improvement</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Family &amp; Community Driven Goals</th>
<th>Families as Experts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Identify local concerns and include families and community members in decision-making and improvement processes</td>
<td>• Recognize the value of families’ lived experiences and the local wisdom they bring to school and community improvement</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Power Balance</th>
<th>Educators as Learners</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Recognize the lack of agency and inequitable power dynamics of traditional school-centric systems and work to shift these dynamics by bringing more voices to the table</td>
<td>• Recognize room for growth and the value of collaborative learning—learn with and alongside the community and families served.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Adapted from Everyday Democracy’s (2019) theory of community collaboration presented as part of the Dialogue to Change community engagement model.
Figure 27

*Action Framework*

![Action Framework Diagram](image)

*Note.* Adapted from Everyday Democracy’s (2019) Dialogue to Change community engagement model.

The process involves a purposeful combination of listening to diverse points of view, engaging in productive struggle, and developing priorities for action (Everyday Democracy, 2019). Engaging the community at this level is a robust and comprehensive approach that would include identifying and training facilitators for dialogue circles through the school’s leadership team, recruiting dialogue participants from the school and community, engaging in dialogue circles, sharing out ideas and concerns from the dialogue circles, developing action ideas from these dialogues, and collaboratively planning for improvement. Facilitation and dialogue participants would engage in reading critical texts, reflecting on readings and their relationship to the local community, and recording concerns and ideas that emerge through this process. Whole group sharing
would incorporate ongoing dialogue, analysis of group discussions, and identification of emerging themes and concerns for collaborative action planning. While Dialogue to Change is just one available model for holistic community engagement, this type of collaboration may provide a means to addressing the here versus there and us versus them tensions embedded throughout the findings, as it could work to re-center community and leverage relationships but also provide a space for collaborative reconstructing narratives around rurality and rural education.

**Beyond the Local Community**

While much work can be done within the rural community, research also suggests that those entering into the field of education are often underprepared for working with rural populations (Anthony-Stephens & Langford, 2020; Lavalley, 2018). Preservice program design may be contributing to this problem, as it is predominantly urban-centric, despite the significant number of districts and students identified as rural, and also predominantly White, resulting in a perception of homogeny within rural populations and a resistance to culturally responsive pedagogy (Anthony-Stephens & Langford, 2020). Yet, it is this very pedagogy that could provide a starting point toward more equitable student outcomes. As previously noted, students and communities will often reject “teachers and schools that they perceive as hostile, alien, or oppressive to their home-based identities” (Gee, as cited in Azano & Stewart, 2016, p. 119)—a point that may at least partially account for this study’s findings regarding perceptions of parents and families—but a critical pedagogy of place affords students the opportunity to “consider the intersection of global and local knowledge” (Azano & Biddle, 2019, p. 8). A pedagogy of place acknowledges the contexts in which people live and learn and moves
toward a critical dialogue concerning power and privilege in which opportunities for all students to participate can emerge (Huffling et al., 2017).

Despite growing awareness of place-based pedagogy and an increasing focus on social justice in many educational leadership programs, these efforts remain largely urban-centered and often absent in undergraduate preservice training, particularly in relation to rural settings (Azano & Biddle, 2019). However, engaging preservice teachers more deliberately in critical pedagogy of place and a counter-hegemonic discourse model of diversity may have significant “equity implications” for preparing preservice teachers for rural communities (Anthony-Stephens & Langford, 2020, p. 333). Furthermore, increased opportunities to dissect social narratives regarding the meaning of rurality and urbanity are key in addressing the invisibility of rurality in preservice training, as are meaningful preservice placements in rural schools that grow preservice teachers’ understandings of the students and communities they will serve (Azano & Stewart, 2016). These measures seem a promising path forward in staffing rural schools with culturally responsive educators who can contribute to a greater sense of agency and more equitable outcomes for rural students.

Limitations and Positionality

Although the findings of this study provide valuable insights into the role of beliefs within Belkin School, as well as a starting point for additional research on the beliefs in rural Appalachian educational settings, these findings are not generalizable, as the study has a variety of limitations. The most immediate of these is the study’s small sample size. The study included only six participants, all of whom work at the same Appalachian school, and utilized purposeful sampling,
specifically criterion sampling (Bogdan & Biklen, 2018; Palinkas, et al., 2015), in the selection of participants. Purposive qualifications included having grown up in or near the studied community, having graduated from the studied school district, and having spent their adult lives living and teaching in the community. Although these qualifications were well-suited to the purposes of this study, as home-grown teachers’ experiences are deeply rooted in local culture and their tenure in the school community provides for a clearer representation of dominant values and beliefs that shape the patterns of thinking and framing that influence instructional practices specifically at the studied school, they do not necessarily speak to the broader rural experience, as rurality encompasses a vast portion of the country that is both culturally and geographically diverse. Each rural community and the culture and historical contexts that shape it are distinct and undoubtedly unique, and further research is needed to explore how beliefs function within these broader rural contexts. This study, however, was content specific and aimed to explore beliefs within this particular setting, so although not generalizable across a broader population, the findings are significant to the studied school.

A further limitation of the small sample size is that it did not include the voices of all school community members who met the purposive qualifications. Although a sample group of 10 was initially considered, this number was ultimately limited to six for feasibility purposes and to ensure that data was manageable and thoroughly and accurately analyzed. Thus, the participants included in the study were limited to the first six who responded to the participation request and met the purposive qualifications. This unfortunately means some voices were excluded and that the data collected may not be entirely reflective of the greater group of “home-grown” educators. Although an obvious
limitation, the research attempted to address this concern in its focus on high-frequency patterns that emerged across questions and across participants, as prevalence across these domains suggests at the very least a starting point for identifying and considering dominant beliefs. Furthermore, given that the research aims were to explore the role of beliefs situated within a history of rural peripheralization, although present in the school community, the study did not include teachers who grew up outside the rural community and relocated to the area. A comparative study examining the perceptions of rurality and rural education that includes these educators may be a potential area for further research.

Another limitation of the study includes the standard shortcomings of qualitative and self-reported design. The study employed self-reported efficacy surveys, as well as interview and focus group data, which is inherently limited by the fact that it cannot be independently verified and accuracy must be accepted at face value. Although an anticipated limitation, the research did attempt to address these concerns. The employed efficacy measures were well-utilized instruments that had undergone rigorous, multi-study factor analyses and construct validity assessments, in which they were positively correlated with other measures of efficacy, providing evidence for construct validity and reliability, and these instruments were used with adherence to the developers’ recommended administration and analysis protocols. Regarding interview and focus group data, the process of analysis is undeniably subjective, interpretive, and to some extent speculative. The analysis process, however, was iterative and involved multiple passes through data sets utilizing both first and second cycle coding methods (Saldaña, 2021) in order to refine codes and categories and provide for greater accuracy of interpretation and representation. Furthermore, the study’s focus on beliefs and efficacy
provided for the subjective nature of the collected data. As noted by Tschannen-Moran, et al. (1998), beliefs and efficacy in particular are often grounded in perceptions of one’s circumstances rather than factual data, so the typical limitations of self-reporting and the inability to independently verify are not particularly problematic for the context-specific purposes of this study. However, as noted above, additional research utilizing larger sample sizes would be needed to produce more generalizable findings.

Another important note is that while the study’s findings did suggest a correlation between both teacher and collective efficacy and the beliefs participants held about rurality, rural students and families, and outcome attribution, it is important to note that correlation does not necessarily indicate causation. Given the complex and multifaceted nature of education and rich histories and systems that influence educational settings and teachers’ experiences of them, there are other variables that may be contributing to educators’ perceptions of efficacy. Further research in this area is needed.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, is the issue of positionality, as this study was conducted in a familiar space and participants were close colleagues. Furthermore, the research was of personal significance. As an educator in rural Appalachia and a native of the area, I was already well acquainted with the power of hegemonic narratives on both a personal and professional level, and my observations and experiences living and working in the studied contexts prompted me to question the formation of beliefs, the messages contributing to them, what role we as educators play in reinforcing them, and how these variables impact educational outcomes. It was through a lens of personal familiarity that I explored these questions.
As a matter of transparency, I think it important to note that the analysis process during this study was challenging, and there were points at which I believed positionality may prove problematic. As I worked through the transcripts and data, I realized how important it was to me that the reader see that, although there is work to be done and historical narratives of peripheralization and outsider status that must be overcome, there is also something immensely beautiful about the rural community and the possibility that exists within rural schools. I genuinely struggled with the data because when examining this data through the lens of my theoretical framework, so many challenges emerged. Patterns of language and thought that are undeniably counterproductive to our work appeared throughout the data, and I could see numerous opportunities to reconsider how we are framing education, how we are framing relationships with students and families, and how we are framing our relationship to broader society. Within these patterns, however, something incredibly special also emerged—love. Each participant spoke about the closeness of the rural community, about the relationships they could build with students and colleagues, and about the love they had for each. They spoke of dedication to their school and students, as well as their love of the rural setting, and made clear what they perceived as the power of relationships. They also expressed a strong desire for other people to know and understand this facet of rurality, for people to see the rural community and to recognize the closeness cultivated with students, and for people to understand our ability to connect because we are small.

As I worked through responses to questions about anticipated student outcomes and their perceived impact on these outcomes, however, it often felt as though this message was lost. So many challenges rose to the surface that I found myself nervous that
the love be absent from my analysis. These are teachers who are clearly challenged by some aspects of their educational contexts, but these are also individuals who recognize the strengths of a rural community, who see the value of that community, and who want other people to see the value of rural communities. I did not want to be one more researcher contributing to the deficit narrative, one more person focusing on the challenges of rural education rather than bringing strengths to the forefront, and I believe this was particularly difficult because I was researching in my own environment. These are my colleagues, people I work with daily, whom I know, and whom I know care, and their participation in this study speaks to that care and the nature of rural relationships. It speaks to the power of the rural community, because these are human beings that within seconds of me announcing my need for participants, jumped in with a resounding “whatever you need.” They understood that I was working on something that was important to me, and, as is often the case in rural communities, they were eager to assist in any way they could. These are individuals who not only volunteered their time and their cooperation, but who sat down and spoke openly and honestly with me. They were frank, even when it was unbecoming, and they trusted me with their perceptions and their truths. It was incredibly difficult for me to wade through this and find myself so focused on the need for growth because I did not want to misrepresent these individuals who had placed this trust in me. I did not want to focus so heavily on the challenges that the strengths became invisible. This concept of invisibility and of not being seen and understood was one of themes about rurality that emerged in the interviews, and I found myself fearful that that if I was not careful in my presentation, I was going to be part of that problem; that if I was not thorough in my analysis and consideration of nuances that
I would further render this community and the individuals who chose to participate in this study invisible.

I also struggled because as I looked at this data and the language and phrases that appeared again and again, I realized my own culpability. I realized the ubiquitous nature of these frames and that we, not they, separate; that all of us to some level have internalized this peripheralization to such an extent that we perpetuate these boundaries through language without even realizing it. The process of listening to interviews and reviewing transcripts was incredibly powerful for me because as I heard these phrases, explanations, and attributions, I realized I too have uttered the same. I, however, I have never sat down and examined transcripts of everything I say in a class or every interaction I have had with a student or a colleague—and likely neither have the participants.

But perhaps we should. Until we really examine these things and consider the language we are using, the ways we frame what we do, how that relates to the lived experiences of our students, and how it can impact their perceptions of possibility; until we examine what we believe and how that comes across in our expressions and our interactions, we will continue to perpetuate these narratives. We will continue to reproduce the core-periphery dynamic. We will continue to promote tensions, contradictions, and false dichotomies that shape understandings of the world and our relationship to it, and our students will internalize these in much the same way we have. It is, therefore, imperative that we consider the ways in which we can revise those beliefs, that we can rewrite our stories, and that we can reframe rurality in a way that emphasizes strengths, recognizes the beauty, and believes in possibility. It is imperative that we begin
to leverage the love and the relationships and community it encompasses and recognize the power for change that resides in unity and a shared vision of possibility. We have work to do in terms of recognizing that, truly believing that, and using that belief in ourselves as an impetus for change, but perhaps that is why this positionality was essential to this work. Perhaps the closeness was necessary for recognizing the complexity and the possibility.

**Personal Leadership Agenda**

This close proximity to the studied school and participants and the ways in which some of my own patterns of language and attribution appeared in the data informs my leadership agenda. This exploration of beliefs, biases, and language, as well as the identification of possible next steps is paramount to effectively fulfilling my roles as a classroom teacher, department lead, member of the Building Leadership Team, and teacher mentor. Although my responsibilities are diverse and vary in each of these capacities, all are aimed at more effectively serving our students, and it is, therefore, imperative that I work towards an ongoing refinement of my understandings of the various contexts that shape students’ experiences, as well as my own culpability in the reproduction of current inequities. As a classroom teacher I am a primary point of contact for students and families, as well as a facilitator of student learning, and, consciously or unconsciously, my beliefs about rurality inevitably shape my work, by way of what DeMatthews (2018) described as “cultural baggage” (p. 128). Although I have been deliberate in working to address this baggage, critical to these efforts is a more authentic attempt to understand the influence of both individual and collective “cultural baggage,” particularly as it relates to the broader community and students’ lived experience. More
deliberate critical reflection is necessary for the development of more culturally responsive and relevant approaches in my classroom. Furthermore, as a team lead and mentor, I wield some influence on practices beyond my own classroom. Be it through curriculum development, meeting agendas, collaborative initiatives, or instructional coaching, I am often in a position to help shape conversations that will in turn impact practice elsewhere in our building and our district. In this way, my beliefs and the decisions they inform contribute to the educational milieu of our school community, and while I have certainly attempted to listen, share, and support my colleagues in a more asset-focused approach, our work to date has not always been holistic. It has often been narrow in its consideration of students’ experiences and has at times neglected the role of beliefs and the vast potential of community engagement. Thus, it is my responsibility to broaden these discussions and the available pathways moving forward.

**Conclusion**

Given the powerful role of community and culture in rural schools, school improvement—particularly that tied to cultural histories, fixed beliefs, and the development of a culturally responsive critical pedagogy of place—cannot happen in a vacuum. The rural community must be part of the improvement process. Such collaborations will foster a more robust examination of perceptions of rurality, as well as the many assets of the community, and provide a space for challenging prevailing narratives and revising them with a vision anchored in possibility. Through this revision of limiting beliefs, we can grow both individual and collective efficacy and begin to challenge the reproduction process with new counter-narratives that promote agency and ability and contribute to more equitable learning outcomes for all students. Understanding
the complexities and dynamics of rural communities and the significance of their stories is central to achieving what Guajardo et al. (2016) describe as a collective “re-authoring” (p. 68). Community is key to this re-authoring. The community is the ultimate stakeholder. These are their stories, their children, their hopes, their histories at work, and their futures at stake.
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https://doi.org/10.35608/ruraled.v34i2.401


APPENDIX A

Attachments:
- 2022-11-16 Consent Stamped.pdf

Institutional Review Board
DUQUESNE UNIVERSITY

Duquesne University IRB Protocol Exemption Notification

To: Lori Wickham
From: David Delmonico, IRB Chair
Subject: Protocol #2022/11/16
Date: 12/09/2022

The protocol 2022/11/16, Conceptions of Rurality: Examining Beliefs and Their Impact on Teacher Efficacy in a Small Appalachian School has been verified by the Institutional Review Board as Exempt according to 45CFR46.101(b)(10): Does not involve human subjects on 12/09/2022.

If applicable, the consent form and/or recruitment flyer have been stamped and are attached to this email or are accessible via Mentor. Please use these stamped versions to distribute or display.

Exempt status means there is no specific expiration date, and you are not required to file annual reviews or termination reports. However, any unanticipated problems, adverse effects on subjects, or protocol deviations must be immediately reported to the IRB Chair before proceeding with the study.

Further, any changes to your study requires the filing of an amendment and is subject to the approval of the IRB Chair. You must wait for approval before implementing any changes to the original protocol. Changes to your protocol may affect the exempt status of your research.

Please contact me if you have any questions regarding this study.

Best wishes in your research,

David Delmonico, Ph.D.
Institutional Review Board, Chair
CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH STUDY

TITLE:
Conceptions of Rurality: Examining Beliefs and Their Impact on Teacher Efficacy in a Small Appalachian School

INVESTIGATOR:
Lori A. Wickham, MA English; MS Education; Ed.D. Candidate Duquesne University
English Instructor & ELA Team Lead

ADVISOR:
Rick McCown, Ph.D.
Director, The Ed.D. in Educational Leadership
Professor & Past Pierre Schouwer, C.S.Sp. Endowed Chair in Mission
Department of Educational Foundation and Leadership
Duquesne University
Pittsburgh, PA 15282

SOURCE OF SUPPORT:
This study is being performed as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the doctoral degree in the School of Education at Duquesne University.

STUDY OVERVIEW:
This study is an investigation of teachers’ beliefs about rurality, rural communities, and rural education, as well as their perceptions of ability and possibility in rural classrooms, and will include two phases of data collection. The first phase will include the completion of brief efficacy surveys, while the second phase will engage participants in individual semi-structured interviews, as well as a focus group discussion. The study will include approximately 4-6 participants who both teach and live in the studied community and are familiar with the rural community and school.

PURPOSE:
You are being asked to participate in a research project that is investigating rural educators’ beliefs about rurality and rural education. The study aims to identify prevalent beliefs among vested teaching staff, as well as analyze perceptions of both individual teacher efficacy and
collective efficacy in order to explore the relationship between beliefs and teachers’ perceptions of their ability to impact student learning. It is hoped that the identification of patterns of thinking and belief—positive and/or negative—will provide a means of identifying potential areas for growth, as well as opportunities for leveraging strengths for improved student outcomes. The study is specifically interested in dominant local culture and beliefs and will thus focus on educators who grew up in and presently both live and work in the studied community. In order to qualify for participation, you must meet the following criteria:

- have grown up in or near the school community
- graduated from the studied school district
- live and teach in the studied school district

PARTICIPANT PROCEDURES:
If you provide your consent to participate, you will be asked to do the following:
- Complete the Teacher’s Sense of Teacher Efficacy survey (24-item, paper/pencil, Likert scale survey)
- Complete the Collective Efficacy Scale (12-item, paper/pencil, Likert scale survey)

These questionnaires should take no more than 30 minutes to complete. In addition, you will be asked to allow me to interview you, as well as participate in post-interview focus group.
- The initial interview is a four-question interview focused on your experiences living and teaching in a rural community. They will last approximately 30 minutes and no longer than one hour. Audio of the interviews will be recorded and transcribed.
- The post-interview focus group will facilitate an organized but loosely structured conversation about participants’ experiences and perspectives of rural education and will last approximately one hour. Audio will be recorded and transcribed.

All data collection procedures will occur on-site (or via Zoom) and will require approximately two to no more than three total hours of participants’ time.

RISKS AND BENEFITS:
There are minimal risks associated with participating in this study, no greater than those encountered in everyday life. The benefits of participating in this study include the opportunity to engage with rural educators and discuss the strengths and challenges of rural education, a potentially improved understanding of rural narratives, and a meaningful contribution a limited but growing body of research dedicated to rural education.

COMPENSATION/COST:
There will be no compensation for participating in this study. There is also no cost for you to participate in this research project.

CONFIDENTIALITY:
Your participation in this study, and any identifiable personal information you provide, will be kept confidential to every extent possible and will be destroyed after the data collection is completed. The study will utilize pseudonyms, and your name will not appear in official
documentation or reports. While audio recordings will be made of individual interviews and the focus group discussion for the purpose of transcription, names and other information that may identify participants will be removed from these transcripts and all audio recordings will be destroyed once transcribed. In addition, any publications or presentations about this research will only use data that is combined together with all subjects; therefore, no one will be able to determine how you responded.

RIGHT TO WITHDRAW:
You are under no obligation to start or continue this study. You can withdraw at any time without penalty or consequence by contacting the researcher by email or phone and stating your desire to withdraw. Previously collected data will be included the study, unless exclusion is specifically requested.

SUMMARY OF RESULTS:
A summary of the results of this study will be provided to at no cost. You may request this summary by contacting the researcher and requesting it. The information provided to you will not be your individual responses, but rather a summary of what was discovered during the research project as a whole.

FUTURE USE OF DATA:
Any information collected that can identify you will have the identifiers removed and will not be used for future research studies, nor will it be provided to other researchers.

VOLUNTARY CONSENT:
I have read this informed consent form and understand what is being requested of me. I also understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, for any reason without any consequences. Based on this, I certify I am willing to participate in this research project.

I understand that if I have any questions about my participation in this study, I may contact Lori A. Wickham at [redacted] as well Dr. Rick McCown at [redacted]. If I have any questions regarding my rights and protections as a subject in this study, I can contact Dr. David Delmonico, Chair of the Duquesne University Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects at [redacted].

Participant’s Signature ___________________________ Date ________________

Researcher’s Signature ___________________________ Date ________________
APPENDIX B

Participants responded to items from the Teacher’s Sense of Efficacy survey (Tschanne-Moran & Woolfolk Hoy, 2001), a 24-item survey that asks to teachers to rate what they believe to be their ability to make a difference in student learning on a scale of one to nine. Items from the survey were coded by efficacy in student engagement, efficacy in instructional strategies, and efficacy in classroom management. The original instrument underwent a rigorous, multi-study factor analysis and construct validity assessment and is considered a well-utilized and validated scale. Participants responded to the following items, and response data was calculated collectively, by subset, and by participant.

1. How much can you do to get through to the most difficult students?
2. How much can you do to help your students think critically?
3. How much can you do to control disruptive behavior in the classroom?
4. How much can you do to motivate students who show low interest in school work?
5. To what extent can you make your expectations clear about student behavior?
6. How much can you do to get students to believe can do well in school work?
7. How well can you respond to difficult questions from your students?
8. How well can you establish routines to keep activities running smoothly?
9. How much can you do to help your students value learning?
10. How much can you gauge student comprehension of what you have taught?
11. To what extent can you craft good questions for your students?
12. How much can you do to foster student creativity?
13. How much can you do to get children to follow classroom rules?
14. How much can you do to improve the understanding of a student who is failing?
15. How much can you do to calm a student who is disruptive or noisy?
16. How well can you establish a classroom management system with each group of students?
17. How much can you do to adjust your lessons to the proper level for individual students?
18. How much can you use a variety of assessment strategies?
19. How well can you keep a few problem students from ruining an entire lesson?
20. To what extent can you provide and alternative explanation or example when students are confused?
21. How well can you respond to defiant students?
22. How much can you assist families in helping their children do well in school?
23. How well can you implement alternative strategies in your classroom?
24. How well can you provide appropriate challenges for very capable students?

Adapted from Teachers sense of teacher efficacy scale by Tschanne-Moran, M., & Woolfolk Hoy, A., 2001, developed at the Ohio State University.
### Teachers’ Sense of Teacher Efficacy Survey Schoolwide Data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category/Subscale</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Alpha</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>TSTE Overall</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Efficacy in Student Engagement:</strong> Items 1, 2, 4, 6, 9, 12, 14, 22</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Efficacy in Instructional Strategies:</strong> Items 7, 10, 11, 17, 18, 20, 23, 24</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Efficacy in Classroom Management:</strong> Items 3, 5, 8, 13, 15, 16, 19, 21</td>
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### Teachers’ Sense of Teacher Efficacy Survey Data by Participant (Mean Scores)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Engagement</th>
<th>Instruction</th>
<th>C. Management</th>
<th>Overall</th>
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APPENDIX C

Participants responded to items from the Collective Teacher Efficacy Scale (Tschannen-Moran, 2004; Tschannen-Moran & Barr, 2004), a 12 item survey that asks to teachers to rate what they believe to be their collective ability to have an impact on student outcomes and behaviors through instructional strategies and behavioral initiatives. Ratings range from one (low) to nine (high), and items are coded by efficacy in student engagement, efficacy in instructional strategies, and efficacy in classroom management. The original instrument underwent a rigorous, multi-study factor analysis and construct validity assessment and is considered a well-utilized and validated scale. Participants responded to the following items, and response data was calculated collectively, by subset, and by participant.

1. How much can teachers in your school do to produce meaningful student learning?
2. How much can your school do to get students to believe they can do well in schoolwork?
3. To what extend can teachers in your school make expectations clear about appropriate student behaviors?
4. To what extent can school personnel in your school establish rules and procedures that facilitate learning?
5. How much can teachers in your school do to help students master complex content?
6. How much can teachers in your school do to promote deep understanding of academic content?
7. How much can teachers in your school do to promote deep understanding of academic concepts?
8. How well can teachers in your school respond to defiant students?
9. How much can teachers in your school do to help students think critically?
10. How well can adults in your school get students to follow school rules?
11. How much can your school do to foster student creativity?
12. How much can your school do to help students feel safe while they are at school?

Adapted from Collective teacher efficacy scale by Tschannen-Moran, M., 2004, developed at the College of William and Mary.
Collective Efficacy Survey Schoolwide Data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category/Subscale</th>
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<th>Alpha</th>
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<td>CTES Overall</td>
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<td>Instructional Strategies: Items 1-6</td>
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<tr>
<td>Student Behavior: Items 7-12</td>
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Collective Teacher Efficacy Data by Participant (Mean Scores)

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<th>Participant</th>
<th>Instruction</th>
<th>Behavior</th>
<th>Overall</th>
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<td>Part. 3</td>
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</table>
APPENDIX D

Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

This standard question protocol will be followed in individual interviews to ensure the same questions and ordering are used across participants and that each participant’s voice is included in the data collected. Questions were designed to elicit responses related to the participant’s general perceptions of rurality, as well as those related to rural education and opportunity/possibility.

Introduction

First of all, thank you so much for taking the time to talk to me today. Your time and thoughts are greatly appreciated.

Our purpose today is to talk about your experiences and perceptions of living and teaching in a rural setting. The interview should last less than an hour, and during this time I am going to ask you a series of questions related to rural life and education.

There are no right or wrong answers to any of these questions, as my goal is to understand your experiences and perspectives. I simply ask that you to be as honest as possible and encourage you to elaborate and provide examples and anecdotes when possible.

As a reminder, this interview is being recorded to allow for a transcript and a thorough and accurate review of your statements, but I assure you your responses will remain anonymous and will be used exclusively for the purposes of this research. Again, honesty is key. Do you have any questions or comments so far? (Answer any participant questions)

If you’re comfortable, let’s go ahead and get started.

Interview Questions

1. Please describe how you feel about living and learning in a rural community?

2. How do you think your students feel about living and learning in a rural community? Explain.
3. How would you describe the relationship between rural communities and broader society? Explain.
   a. In your opinion, how does this relationship relate to education?

4. Where do you see your students in the future?
   a. What impact do you believe you have on these outcomes?

**Potential extensions**

Could you provide a specific example?

Could you tell me about a time when…

Could you tell me a little more about that?

Could you explain what you mean by…

**Concluding Remarks**

That concludes my questions for you at this time. I truly appreciate your time and your willingness to participate. Your responses are incredibly helpful. Do you have anything you would like to revisit or clarify before we conclude?

Do you have any questions for me?

If there are no further concerns, I won’t take up anymore of your time today. I’m looking forward to building on these insights during the optional focus group and will be reaching out to you in the near future to make arrangements should you choose to participate. Again, thank you for your help. I hope you have a wonderful day.
APPENDIX E

Focus Group Protocol

The focus group protocol will be utilized during the optional focus group that will serve as the final phase of data collection. The protocol is designed to facilitate an organized but loosely structured conversation about participants’ experiences and perspectives of rurality, rural education, opportunity, and student outcomes.

Introduction

Good evening and welcome to our focus group. Thank you for taking the time to join us. Your time and thoughts are greatly appreciated.

Each of you has already been interviewed individually, so you are familiar with the general topics of our conversation. Our purpose today is to continue that conversation about living and teaching in a rural setting but in a group context that will allow you exchange ideas and perceptions with one another. Our conversation will last about an hour, and during this time I am going to provide a series of prompts to help focus the conversation, but my role is as a facilitator. I encourage you to dialogue with one another and respond to one another’s comments.

As noted in the interview process, there are no right or wrong answers to any of these questions, as my goal is to understand your experiences and perspectives. However, in a group setting we may encounter differing points of view, as we each bring our own unique contexts to the conversation. Often those differences can provide useful information for better understanding experiences and points of view. I encourage you to share openly, even if your point of view differs from what others have said, and I ask that you be as honest as possible, elaborating and providing examples and anecdotes when possible.

Our conversation is being recorded to allow for a transcripts and a thorough and accurate review of responses, but I assure you your responses will remain anonymous beyond this group and will be used exclusively for the purposes of this research. Do you have any questions or comments so far? (Answer any participant questions)

If everyone is comfortable, let’s go ahead and get started.
Engagement Question:

1. I’d like to begin by letting you discuss your experience of living, learning, and teaching in a rural community. What is the rural experience to you?

Exploratory Question:

2. How is rural education different than education elsewhere?
   a. How do these differences impact you as educators?

3. What was your motivation for working in a rural school?

4. Why do you stay in rural education?

Exit Questions

Is there anything anyone wanted to revisit or clarify?

Is there anything anyone would like to add that maybe we missed?

Potential extensions

Could you provide a specific example?

Could you tell me about a time when…

Could you tell me a little more about that?

Could you explain what you mean by…

Conclusion

That concludes my questions. I truly appreciate your willingness to converse with one another. Your responses are incredibly helpful. Before we close, does anyone have anything they would like to revisit or clarify? (Allow clarifications if needed)

Does anyone have any questions for me? (Answer participant questions)

If there are no further concerns, I won’t take up anymore of your time. Again, thank you all for your time, your help with this research, and the service you provide to rural students. I appreciate you and hope you have a wonderful day.
APPENDIX F

Initial Thematic Analysis Instrument

This instrument suggests the means for the initial organization of descriptive data and includes categories based on the nature and alignment of questions included in the semi-structured interview and focus group protocols. These categories were then refined through the first and second cycle coding methods.

**Rurality (local) Trends**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>General</th>
<th>Self</th>
<th>Students</th>
<th>Other</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
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<td>Theme 3</td>
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**Rurality (intersectional) Trends**

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<th>Education</th>
<th>Other</th>
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### Possibility/Opportunity Trends

<table>
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<th>General</th>
<th>Students</th>
<th>Self</th>
<th>Other</th>
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### School Trends

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### Key Interview Themes by Participant

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Rurality (local)</th>
<th>Rurality (intersectional)</th>
<th>Possibility/Opportunity</th>
<th>School Perceptions</th>
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<tbody>
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