

The Hidden Crisis: Rural Schools and College Matriculation

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The decision to pursue a college degree is amongst the most defining moments in a person's life. A comparison of earning potential between those who have a bachelor's degree, and those who do not, reveals an earnings gap of nearly \$20,000 per year. To further illustrate this discrepancy, high school graduates are roughly half as likely to have a career track job, three times more likely to be unemployed, and four times more likely to live in poverty (Taylor et al., 2014). The value of having just a high school diploma is rapidly decreasing. New graduates are no longer able to obtain middle class, career-oriented jobs. As a result, college has become one of the last bastions of social mobility, and often represents the only path towards economic security for students of low socio-economic status (Taylor et al., 2014).

The socio-economic necessity of a college degree has driven schools around the country to reform curricula in an attempt to better align secondary education with post-secondary matriculation. In this context, the schooling "crisis" of the past ten years has been focused on failing urban schools. In many ways, it has been appropriate to concentrate on reform efforts in urban schools, primarily because of the sheer number of students in urban districts; however, this paper will deviate from an urban-centric analysis of post-secondary attainment and will instead focus on America's hidden crisis, the plight of the rural school.

Roughly 20% of America's students attend rural districts; many of which face conditions that mirror America's central cities (Jerry, Showalter, Klein, & Letter, 2014). As a result, rural communities are some of the most impoverished and least educated. Existing literature has found that rural students attend college at a rate equal to 84.7% of

their metro counterparts (Koricich, 2014). Of those that do pursue post-secondary education, many find themselves limited in both access and choice. Without question, factors like poverty, access, and choice are challenges that both rural and urban schools face; however, these factors differentially affect rural schools in ways that have received little attention from educational researchers and policy makers.

Recognizing schools as a product of their community necessitates an evaluation of post-secondary attainment in a uniquely rural context. The gap between metropolitan and urban schools cannot be fully explained by the common socio-economic indicators of collegiate success. This paper's contribution to existing literature can be found in a reconceptualization of the ways in which we think about rural schools and their benchmarks of student success. As a complex, integrated element of the community, rural schools extend far beyond the schoolhouse, affecting communities in ways that cannot be explained by a standardized metric of educative success. This paper aims to highlight some of the challenges unique to rural communities and better understand the intersections of rurality and post-secondary attainment. Specifically, this paper will address issues of placism, community support, proximity, and readiness as a means of further understanding the distinct ways in which the rural community students matriculate to post-secondary institutions.

The subsequent sections of the paper are designed to add to our cumulative understanding of rural education and to help readers reconceptualize the ways in which rural communities and their educative structures are perceived. The first and second section provides a discussion on the similarities and differences of rural and urban school challenges. Rural education data and trends are presented in section two, along with two

west Tennessee case studies in section three. The final section of the paper includes a discussion of how placism, community support, proximity, and college readiness affect rural students' post-secondary outcomes.

Parallels and Differences in Rural and Urban Schools

Few would dispute that urban schools are in crisis, or that the attention directed towards urban schools by researchers, educators, and policy makers is not a worthwhile endeavor. However, many rural districts are also in crisis, and they indisputably receive less attention from the aforementioned stakeholders. In many rural communities, a single school often services an entire county; while in urban districts, there are many schools serving a highly varied populace. . Although locale might suggest rural schools have little in common with their urban counterparts, we know that both types of schools are plagued by the same factors despite vastly different environmental constraints imposed by rural versus urban settings. Both urban and rural districts are impacted negatively by poverty and demonstrate low levels of post-secondary matriculation (Koricich, 2014; Byun et al, 2012). In fact, the gap between urban and rural districts in regards to college readiness and matriculation may be smaller than initially thought.

Andrew Koricich (2014) examined college choice and matriculation in a national, representative sample of high school graduates. Choice refers to a graduate's ability to decide whether and when to pursue higher education, while matriculation refers to a process culminating in successful post-secondary enrollment. By extracting data from the Educational Longitudinal Study of 2002 (ELS: 2002) and the Integrated Post-Secondary Education Data System (IPEDS, 2004), Koricich's analysis illuminates the

post-secondary pathways available to rural and urban graduates. The absence of industry, coupled with an industrialized approach to agriculture, has left many rural communities mired in joblessness. In many ways, this trend mirrors the decrease in manufacturing seen throughout America's urban centers. His findings are consistent with previous research on socio-economic status and college attendance. Specifically, he found that household income is correlated positively with college matriculation and choice; as income increases so do students' college options and matriculation rates (Koricich, 2014). Koricich also examined the depth of poverty, which refers to both the number of impoverished, as well as the economic distance between the poor and those that fall above the poverty line. He found that the depth of poverty in rural communities often eclipses that seen in an urban setting. Interestingly, based on effect sizes for a wide variety of student outcome measures, Koricich reported that rural students are less affected by poverty than urban students. Suffice it to say the relationship between place (rural versus urban) and poverty is complex and that poverty affects each place in markedly different ways. A detailed discussion of this particular finding will be provided later in this paper.

The great migration led to a concentration of African-Americans in urban centers. In large part, the challenges faced by urban schools have driven the language and legislation regarding the "achievement gap" (Anderson, Medrich, & Fowler, 2007). This term generally refers to the educational disparities found between students of color and their white counterparts. Much of the existing literature on the subject focuses on understanding racial inequities in an urban context (Strange, Johnson, & Finical, 2009; Anderson, Medrich, & Fowler, 2007; Solomon & Sekayi, 2007; Jerry, Showalter, Klein,

& Letter, 2014). And as mentioned previously, racial inequities in urban settings deserve attention; however, rural districts across the country serve equally high proportions of Black and Latino students and deserve attention as well (Jerry, Showalter, Klein, & Letter, 2014). According to the Rural School and Community Trust (2014) rural states face significant challenges in educating their robust minority populations. It must be noted, however, that the influence of race is not total. As will be demonstrated in a later case study, student outcomes are affected by multiple variables, and the relationships between race, poverty, and place must be interpreted within the context of individual communities..

Unsurprisingly, college matriculation is easily predicted by poverty and race. In addition, the education levels (highest degree achieved) of parents, particularly of mothers, is a significant predictor of students' post-secondary success. In shorts, educated parents tend to have higher achieving children (Mangione & Speth, 1998). Many rural and urban areas have citizens who are drastically undereducated, accounting for only a fraction of overall degree attainment (ACS: 2013). Degree attainment tends to skew towards White and Asian affluence in urban and suburban areas. . Within a rural context, the disproportionate concentration of white poverty muddles this picture, suggesting that parental motivation may be lowest amongst the white poor (Wentzel, 1998). As we move forward, it is important to keep in mind the ways that educational attainment, and its disproportionately low representation in urban and rural communities, limits the access available to certain populations within these communities.

Although urban and rural areas have little in common geographically, they share many of the same challenges. They share similar social and structural impediments in

regard to educating students. However, we should resist generalizing the issues faced by each community. The influence of place is significant and will be explored in a rural context later in this paper.

National and State Trends in Rural Education

National and state education statistics and trends for rural districts are presented in this section. As cited previously, rural students attend college at a rate of 84.7% of their urban counterparts, with choice and access differentially affecting rural students (Koricich, 2014).

In regard to choice, Koricich (2014) states that non-metro students are more likely to attend two-year institutions, public colleges, inclusive institutions, and those that focus primarily on sub-baccalaureate credentials. As a result, these students, by virtue of the community in which they were raised, are less likely to achieve the same level of academic achievement and corresponding economic prosperity—as those who come from metropolitan counties (p. 24).

Students from rural districts are disproportionately underrepresented amongst communities of higher education, but even of those attending post-secondary schools, many are attending the state's inclusive or open enrollment institutions. Many rural students forego four-year public programs to pursue associate degrees when compared to their affluent suburban peers (Koricich, 2014). Two-year institutions and public colleges offer a valuable education, often partially or fully funded by the state; however, rural students are underrepresented in America's most selective colleges and universities. Thus,

the intersections of rurality and poverty directly contribute to less desirable and prestigious post-secondary choices.

Access is also a barrier for rural students in the sense that many rural communities are not located near any post-secondary institutions. In response to this barrier, many states have begun to deviate from a traditional four-year approach to post-secondary matriculation by opening community colleges in rural areas, thereby bridging the gap between urban access and rural complacency (Hlinka, Mobelini, & Giltner, 2015; Eller et al., 1998; Howley, Howley, Howley, & Duncan, 2013). For students wanting a four-year degree, community colleges have developed 2-year, locally based, feeder programs designed to ease the process of college matriculation. While this method of higher education eases the migration, research has shown that even these programs must contend with a variety of place-based impediments (Hlinka, Mobelini, & Giltner, 2015). Specifically, issues pertaining to family, poverty, and place limit the transition out of community colleges and into four-year institutions. Nationally, only 26% of students expressing a desire to obtain a bachelors degree held one nine years later (Long & Kurlaender, 2009).

In addition to choice and access, other researchers have focused on college retention of rural students. Geographic distance is a significant predictor of rural student retention. In an attrition study of a micropolitan, university, Williams and Luo (2010) found that the further students were from home the more likely they were to drop out. Rural students were, however, more likely to stay if they lived within a 50-mile radius of the university. A student whose home town was 50-100 miles from the university reduced the probability of first-year persistence by 10.7%, whereas a student student who lived

more than 100 miles away reduced persistence probability by an additional 9.4%. The findings from this study represent a significant relationship between space and attrition. As rural students migrate away from home, their connections with place are significantly strained. In a subsequent section, geographic distance will be addressed in case studies of two counties in western Tennessee.

As mentioned earlier, rural students appear to be less affected by poverty in regard to some educative outcomes (Koricich, 2014). For example, graduation rates have shown to be significantly higher in rural communities, and in addition, when the variable of social support is isolated, rural students have demonstrated a slight advantage in degree attainment. Meece, and Irvin (2012) theorize that *community support* often mitigates extreme poverty by lending social capital to education, and integrating the school within socio-cultural fabric of the rural community. The role of community support in rural schools will be discussed at length in the upcoming sections.

A study published by the Rural School and Community Trust (RSCT, 2013-14); was designed “(1) to provide information and analyses that highlight the priority policy needs of rural public schools and the communities they serve, and (2) to describe the complexity of rural contexts in ways that can help policymakers better understand the challenges faced by their constituencies and formulate policies that are responsive to those challenges” (p. 1). Each state was measured on five gauges: (1) the Importance of rural education, (2) the Diversity of rural students and their families, (3) Socioeconomic Challenges facing rural communities across the nation, (4) the Educational Policy Context impacting rural schools, and (5) the Educational Outcomes of students in rural schools in each state. (p.3) . The cumulative total provided a sixth, Rural Education Priority Gauge (RSCT, 2014). The goal of the report was to provide an overview of rural education in

the US, and more specifically, to enlighten policy makers on the necessity of rurally sensitive legislation.

Tennessee ranks amongst the states of highest concern in the RSCT cumulative priority gauge, scoring in the top-quartile of Socioeconomic Challenges, Importance, Educational Policy Context, and Educational Outcomes. The sheer number of rural students elevates the importance of Tennessee on national scale. In addition, many students, ranging from Appalachia in the east, to the Mississippi river in the west, face a depth of poverty not seen in many other areas, rural and urban alike. Poverty and scope are two of the most important factors influencing the current state of education in Tennessee. Although there is little debate about the importance of addressing the education crisis in America's cities, legislators must supplement urban reform with rurally sensitive legislation. The RSCT data make mandate policy reform in addressing the systemic issues of poverty and performance (RSCT, 2014). Although rural crisis cannot be simplified merely to a discussion of policy, the RSCT makes a compelling argument for the realization of rurally sensitive legislation, and an overarching framework through which policy can support rural districts.

Lake and Wayne Counties: A Case Study of Two Counties in West Tennessee

In order to gain a richer understanding of rural education in west Tennessee, I have elected to focus on two rural, remote counties in west Tennessee, Lake County and Wayne County. These particular counties were selected because of their geographic location relative to Shelby County and because they have the lowest proportion of college educated citizens in the state. After providing a brief description of each county using

data gathered from the American Community Survey, the U.S. Census, the Tennessee State Report Card, and interviews with community members, I hope to illuminate some of the barriers that affect college readiness, access, and choice in both counties. In many ways, Lake and Wayne represent the larger socio-economic trends throughout the region, and in some ways they diverge from regional and national trends. The purpose of this case study is to highlight these similarities and differences within the context of existing rural education literature.

General demographic data for Lake and Wayne are presented in Table 1. For comparison purposes, data from Shelby County and all of Tennessee are also provided. Wayne County has nearly twice the population of Lake County, but over three times the land measured in square miles (736 and 196 respectively). In addition, both places are drastically undereducated, and have poverty levels well below the national and state averages.

Table 1. General Demographics for Lake, Wayne and Comparison Counties

Lake County	Wayne County	Shelby County	Tennessee	United States
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Population	7,773	16,996	932,919	6,402,387	308,745,538
Percent White	69.60%	92.20%	41%	78.20%	74.00%
Percent Black	25.80%	5.90%	52.30%	16.80%	0.13%
Median Household Income	\$27,114.00	\$41,458.00	\$46,250	\$44,268.00	\$53,046.00
Poverty Rate	31.70%	20.20%	20.80%	17.60%	15.40%
Percentage of population with a bachelors degree or higher	7.00%	7.90%	29%	23.80%	28.80%

Lake County. Lake County is located in the upper northwest corner of Tennessee. It borders both Missouri and Kentucky. There are two towns in Lake County, the largest of which has a population of 4,464 and the smallest 1,795. Industry in the county is largely provided by the public sector. The northwest corner of the county is home to one of Tennessee's largest prisons, while the school system and sheriff's department rounds out the primary employers in Lake County. It must be noted that although agriculture is present within Lake County, the use of industrial equipment limits the number of jobs available. In the domain of education, Lake County has no form of post-secondary access. The closest community college is 25 miles to the south, while the nearest four-year institution is 50 miles to the east. Lake County is essentially an educational desert and has the lowest post-secondary attainment of any district in West Tennessee.

Wayne County. Wayne County is an equally rural area approximately 148 miles due east of Shelby County. It sits on the Tennessee/Alabama border. There are three primary towns, Clifton, Waynesboro, and Collinwood, with populations of 2,694, 2,449, and 982, respectively. In contrast to Lake County, many residents in Wayne live outside the central towns. Also unlike Lake, Wayne is home to a variety of industry, with each town operating its own manufacturing base. As a result, the Median Family Income of Wayne County is significantly higher than most of West Tennessee. There are two high schools in Wayne, each with similar race and SES profiles (See Table 2) Higher education in Wayne County is extremely limited, with the closest community college and four-year institution nearly 50 miles away. There are clear differences in Lake and Wayne in terms of industry and development. Although degree attainment is astronomically low in both places, residents of Wayne County mitigate rural poverty because of the manufacturing industries that have set up shop there.

Table 2. Education Demographics in Lake and Wayne Counties

Lake County High School	Wayne County High School	Collinwood High School	Shelby County Schools	State of Tennessee
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County	Lake	Wayne	Wayne	Shelby County	N/A
Percent White	67.30%	98.00%	97.60%	20.20%	65.60%
Percent Black	31.50%	1.30%	2.40%	67.60%	24.10%
Graduation Rate	89.40%	95.60%	94.00%	74.60%	87.20%
Hope Eligibility	14.90%	20.30%	32.00%	25.40%	36.90%
ACT College Readiness (All four categories)	6.00%	12.00%	12.00%	11.00%	16.00%
Average ACT Composite	16.1	18.6	18	17	19.3

The data in Table 2 shows that Lake County falls far behind the national and state averages in terms of HOPE Eligibility, ACT preparedness, and ACT Composites. It must be noted, however, that Lake County's graduation rates exceed the national and state averages, representing an exceptional accomplishment for a school contending with a poverty rate of 31%.

In a direct comparison, Wayne County appears to fair better on all success indicators provided in the table; however, both counties relative to state and national data have exceptionally low rates of degree attainment (see Table 1). Interestingly, both counties have graduation rates that are considerably higher than Shelby County, state and national averages. This discrepancy necessitates a more comprehensive discussion later in this paper.

Although both counties have low measures of degree attainment, there are significant differences in local circumstance. Lake County falls behind Wayne County in the areas of Median Household Income and Percent of the population living under the poverty line. In addition, Lake County is nearly 25% African-American while Wayne County is over 90% white; aligning with national trends, poverty is disproportionately concentrated within communities of color. It must be noted, however, that these data cannot be viewed within a vacuum. Wayne County's industrial base undoubtedly mitigates rural crisis, but only in relation to equally remote areas. Specifically, the poverty rate in Wayne County is substantially lower than other remote areas, but roughly equal to Memphis's rate of 20.8%. Given the economic gap between the two areas, it becomes easy to categorize Wayne County as a community outside of rural crisis. Although relatively less impoverished, the data cited in Tables 1 and 2 reveals a drastically undereducated community lacking in measures of readiness and attainment. A more thorough discussion on the importance of readiness and its relationship with choice will be discussed in the final section of this paper.

Despite the challenges that exist in these two rural West Tennessee counties, it is also important to note their successes. Both counties have high school graduation rates that exceed Shelby County (74.6%), national (81%) and state averages (87.2%) (ACS, 2013). This seems to be the trend in most west Tennessee counties (see Table 3). Despite severe socio-economic disadvantage, rural schools excel in limiting secondary attrition. I will theorize that the cause for this gap is the ability of small, insular communities to organize social capital around local schools, effectively boosting the performance and attrition levels of secondary education in West Tennessee.

Much of this section has been devoted to identifying barriers that limit rural post-secondary attainment. In the final section of this paper, I will expound upon some of these issues within a framework that considers the importance of place (i.e., rural communities) in our interpretations of college readiness and success. The data shows that many rural communities face extrinsic barriers to post-secondary attainment; however, in the subsequent sections, an exploration of intrinsic elements will be explored, focusing on the ways in which uniquely rural factors limit degree attainment.

Framework for Understanding Challenges Unique to Rural Schools

The gap in rural post-secondary education cannot be wholly accounted for by the limitations outlined above. There are several factors unique to the rural community that limit educational attainment. In this section I will explore four factors uniquely affecting the rural community, limiting student access to higher education. These four factors are Placism, readiness, insular communities, and proximity to institutions of higher education.

Placism: We must critically examine the ways in which our federal programs intersect with the communities they intend to serve, and the ways in which these programs form the educative realities of rural communities, either through their action, or their inaction. Ample literature on the subject indicates that rural schools must contend with adverse effects of federal legislation (Yettick, Baker, Wickersham, & Hupfeld, 2014; Barton, 2003; Goetz, 2005; Strange, Johnson, & Finical, 2009). These authors

present a varied survey of federal reform and its intersections with a case study in Pennsylvania. In recent years, the issue of funding has risen to the forefront of conversations regarding the urban-rural divide. Strange, Johnson and Finical, specifically, explored the disparity in finance formulas for large and small schools. Approaching the subject by analyzing federal funding practices under the Title 1 grant, they argued that per-pupil funding privileges schools with a larger number but lower percentage of economically disadvantaged students. To prove this, the authors presented a case study of two Pennsylvania districts, one small and rural, the other large and urban. In their analysis they state, “In each of these four groupings of districts with similar poverty rates, the larger districts receive more Title I funding per Title I student than the smaller districts. The higher the level of poverty, the wider is the disparity” (Barton, 2003; Goetz, 2005; Strange, Johnson, & Finical, 2009). Connecting back with the idea of urban-centric education reform, funding often aligns with a similar model of distribution. In communities with high poverty rates, this funding is essential for combating systemic issues of poverty, both in an urban and rural setting.

To add a more complete theoretical context to some of the studies provided above, we turn to the idea of placism, or discrimination founded in space. Lorna Jimerson offers a thorough analysis of placism within the context of No Child Left Behind; she outlines the various ways in which NCLB, specifically, disadvantages rural communities. After providing a brief context on the current state of rural education, Jimerson proceeds to outline three primary instances of placism within federal legislation. Adequate Yearly Progress, the “Highly Qualified Teacher” provision, and Sanctions all represent significant, uniquely rural, obstacles.

Adequate Yearly Progress, or AYP, was a cornerstone of NCLB legislation upon its introduction. The goal being that all schools would make steps towards a state-mandated proficiency target. When discussing the constituencies of rural schools, Jimerson states, “The fundamental problem is that small numbers make judgments based on these statistics unreliable. Differences from one year to the next do not necessarily reflect school effectiveness or quality” (Jimerson, 2005, pg.5). Jimerson points out the volatility inherent within small schools; one or two exceptionally over or underprepared students can determine whether a school meets AYP. The issue, then, is not the tests themselves, but rather the overarching metric used to determine progress. A rurally sensitive assessment would recognize small-school volatility and integrate a metric safeguard for outliers. The volatility of small-school AYP leaves rural schools in an educational purgatory, caught somewhere in-between the autonomy of meeting AYP, and the sanctions of falling short..

Placism persists in a second aspect of NCLB legislation. The highly qualified teacher mandate is an admirable goal, but ignores the realities of many rural districts. The legislation is founded within the idea that all teachers who teach “core academic” subjects be highly qualified in their field. Teachers who are viewed as “highly qualified” must pass a test, have a bachelor’s degree in their field, or complete an evaluation for veteran teachers. Perhaps the most pertinent point raised by Jimerson in her Placist critique of the Highly Qualified Teacher provision can be seen when she states, “Wealthier districts entice new candidates with salary supplements, signing bonuses, and higher pay. Financially strapped rural districts are unable to do the same. Nationwide, average salaries in rural districts are 13.4% lower than in urban and suburban districts”

(Jimerson, 2005, pg. 7). Many rural districts struggle to attract and retain excellent teachers, adding additional stipulations to their hiring process only serves to limit the staffing efficacy of rural schools. In this vein, Jimerson believes that the most effective rural teachers are able to integrate within the communities they serve. She identifies “rural people” as the most likely candidates to be both effective and lasting within rural communities. The concern being that rural peoples often score lower on standardized tests, and as a result, these provisions will stifle the flow of educators from rurally disadvantaged backgrounds (Jimerson, 2005).

The impact of placism is found in the relationship between federal legislation and the operative capacity of the rural school. A direct consequence of failing AYP is the imposition of federal sanctions on failing schools. In light of inequitable measurement, these sanctions only serve to further limit the efficacy of rural schools in an often already challenging environment. Schools subjected to federal sanctions effectively lose an element of autonomy. For example, sanctioned schools must devote twenty-percent of their Title I funding to choice transportation and supplemental services. What this means is that schools not meeting AYP must allow the option of transportation for students wishing to attend another district. The limitations imposed on failing schools are universal; however, within rural communities, federal action undermining agency is especially detrimental (Jimerson, 2005). As referenced by Jimerson, a vast majority of the sanctions implemented by NCLB are “punitive, not productive”. In communities where the school is a centralized institution, the loss of autonomy equates to a loss of community agency. As a result, schools are unable to incorporate local capital within the educative structures of highly varied communities.

Readiness: Much of this paper has focused on demonstrating the post-secondary disadvantage faced by rural communities. In this section, I will attempt to answer the question of why we must educate rural students for college matriculation. The necessity of post-secondary choice will drive this section, predicting the critique that rural students in industrial counties have little need for readiness. In reality, rural students are amongst the most needy; limited opportunity necessitates that communities diversify the options available to rural students. Readiness offers a pathway towards degree attainment while also ensuring that the foundation for effective citizenship is established in reading and mathematic proficiency.

One necessity of choice is highlighted in the socio-economic advantage of holding a bachelors degree (Taylor et al., 2014). Even in communities where poverty is mitigated by manufacturing, the value of choice is no less apparent. In places like Wayne County, the revenue generated from manufacturing may mitigate hardship, but 20% of the population remains impoverished. Of that 20%, the concentration of poverty is skewed disproportionately towards the minority population of 8%. College readiness presents an opportunity for rural schools to address issues of marginalization, and diversify the opportunities available to recent graduates. If we do not prepare students for post-secondary pathways, we risk establishing opportunity deserts, where graduates are neither able to obtain local jobs, or build upon the readiness established in schools.

Although measurements of college readiness are designed to assess post-secondary potential; at their core, they account for fundamental skills in reading and

mathematics. Ensuring proficiency is not merely a means of increasing degree attainment, but rather, a foundation upon which communities can build. For students who exercise their right to choice and forego college, it is important that they are equipped with the foundational skills required to sustain agency in a world that prioritizes intellectual capital. Drawing from the work of John Dewey (1916) and his conception of Democracy, he states:

In order to have a large number of values in common, all the members of the group must have an equable opportunity to receive and to take from others. There must be a large variety of shared undertakings and experiences. Otherwise, the influences which educate some into masters, educate others into slaves (pg. 97-98)

Effective citizenship within Dewey's democracy necessitates the ability of all peoples to connect and share radically within a common environment. It is my argument that the basic proficiencies provided through college readiness are necessary for Dewey's democratic ideal, ensuring that citizenship is unabridged by educative inequalities. As intellectual capital becomes an integral element of social engagement, it will become increasingly necessary that students achieve college readiness as a qualification for effective citizenship. Integration of the rural community within the matrix of socio-cultural engagement will further Dewey's idea of democracy and limit marginalization amongst rural peoples.

Insular Communities: Prior research by authors like Koricich and Byun have found that rural communities socially support education in ways that increase educative

results while mitigating the influence of poverty. This section will attempt to explain the phenomena observed in Koricich and Byun's work, while proposing an alternative theory for the place of insular communities within discussions pertaining to post-secondary attainment. In Lake and Wayne Counties, conversations regarding social support are particularly pertinent, as they both have graduation rates that defy socio-economic predictors of educative success. This section will attempt to understand the implications of rural community support on the college migratory process, questioning the detachment of community and re-acclimation of place inherent within rural migrations.

Graduation rates are a desirable statistic because they measure the ability of the school, and in extension, the community, to grab students and bring them to a designated finish line. In many ways, the graduation rates of Lake and Wayne are a measurable success by schools facing harsh external factors. This should not be taken lightly, as it represents a significant achievement, and suggests that schools in West Tennessee have found ways to activate community resources in support of education. In the work of Wilcox et al (2014), the authors confirm this, finding that rural graduation rates benefit from delineating the divide between school and community. They state, "Educators in the higher-performing schools highlighted the quality and amount of outreach to families. Torana educators, for example, indicated that the school had become a primary conduit for helping families find and gain assistance to a wide variety of services" (Wilcox et al, 2014). The authors of this study suggest that rural schools must actively engage the rural community in efforts to harness social capital. Functioning as a focal point for "services", the rural school establishes itself as a pillar of the socio-economic fabric of "Torana". The goal being that rural schools extend beyond the classroom, integrating education

within all aspects of the rural community. The ability of rural schools to access community resources should serve as an interesting point of reference for researchers interested in community engagement. It is my belief that the integration of education and community fosters a more dynamic attachment to place, and presents interesting questions when assessing the post-secondary state of rural education.

The resistance referenced by Byun and Koricich is largely a product of localization. As customs, beliefs, and culture concentrate within a community, the people develop a sense of shared experience. Research has shown that rural students often detach from the rural community out of necessity (Eacott and Sonn, 2006; Theodori and Theodori, 2014). As a result, many students experience a profound sense of place sickness when detached from spheres of rural support (Stewart and Abbott-Chapman, 2011). The communal resources that allow for rural resistance also defines place sickness amongst rural students. The ability to mitigate socio-economic predictors of educative success draws from an insular capital that, when detached, limits the effective transition of rural students into places of higher education. In large part, this phenomenon can be attributed to the insular nature of rural communities. Many communities lend capital to education, but the insular nature of rural areas works to bind rural students to place in a way unique to rural environments.

The relationship between place and migration offers a unique view into the dynamic of rural communities. For schools able to tap community resources, they may also limit the student's ability to detach, and effectively enter post-secondary migrations. Some researchers have begun to advocate for a critical pedagogy of place (Gruenewald, 2003; Azano, 2011; Azano, 2014). These theories recognize the connection between

community and education, while arguing for a pedagogy that incorporates critical views of place within the classroom. In the context of the problem outlined above, critical place based theory could allow for students to understand rurality in a way that breaks the insulation of rural communities. Incorporating critical theory within rural schools should allow for a more nuanced understanding of place, and as a result, mitigate the environmental shock of post-secondary migrations. Ultimately, further study is needed on the ways in which rural areas supplement education, focusing specifically on the relationship between social capital and college matriculation.

Proximity to Institutions of Higher Learning: The physical barriers inherent within rural education are significant and require further attention by educators, policymakers, and community members. However, perception and identity are often linked to the physical spaces forming community (Streibel, 1998). This section will attempt to explain some of the ways in which access affects the conceptualization of higher education, and the role this plays in college matriculation.

Understanding place in a physical context necessitates an evaluation of the relationship between physical institutions of higher education and the ways in which they are conceptualized amongst rural people. Research on the subject confirms the relationship between physical place and communal identity, stating that the “physical matrix plays a pervasive role in the construction of cultural and personal identity, so that the more we become distanced from this physical matrix, the more we become distanced from the grounds of our life world” (Streibel, 1998). In rural areas, the “physical matrix” of education is often confined to the local secondary institution (Azano, 2011). Without tangible spaces of higher education, college never enters the “physical matrix” of the

rural “life world”. As a consequence, college, and in extension, college matriculation, becomes an abstract notion rather than a concrete step.

The issue of access is multifaceted, as higher education is both inaccessible and abstract within the rural community. For many rural students, the foremost barrier inhibiting degree attainment is the conceptualization of college as something outside the realm of rural community. As a result, students attempting to overcome tangible barriers of access must also contend with the aggravating factors of a stretched “life world” and an abstract, distant notion of post-secondary pathways.

Conclusion

This paper attempts to add to existing literature by proposing an alternative framework through which we can view rural schools and their educative results. Functioning on the premise that rural schools serve as a focal point of the rural community, a variety of factors are presented in an attempt to reconceptualize the ways in which we view rural schools. Specifically, this paper proposed the idea that issues pertaining to placism, readiness and choice, insular communities, and proximity to institutions of higher education all affect rural schools in ways not visible through standard metrics of evaluation.

Although this paper only addresses the intersections of rurality and post-secondary education, I believe it represents a lens through which we can begin to view education in more holistic ways. Further research is required on the relationships between schools and communities outside a rural context. I believe that the benefits of understanding education in relation to communities are universal. The goal of this work is not to solely reconceptualize rural post-secondary education, but also to present an

alternative paradigm through which we can view all schools and their educative results.

In an attempt to better align educational practice with the realities of the communities served, I urge policy makers, researchers, and community members to incorporate elements of community within all assessments of schooling and their educative results.

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