Review of Research

Conceptions of Choice, Equity, & Rurality in Educational Research:
A Review of the Literature on Rural Education and School Choice Policies

James Bridgeforth
Kate Kennedy
Jacob Alonso
Taylor Enoch-Stevens

Issues of school choice regularly appear in popular discourse related to resources, equity, and freedom in education. Although school choice policies and initiatives promote a vision of additional schooling options for all students, the predominant target of choice advocates and researchers has been densely populated, urban cores in the United States (McShane & Smarick, 2018). However, this belies the fact that rural communities have also engaged in forms of school choice decision-making. While some research has explored rural school choice, we believe there are myriad, novel opportunities for meaningful education research regarding school choice, equity, and conceptions of rurality. Over nine million children in the United States, or nearly 20% of the public-school student population, attend a school designated as rural (Kena et al., 2015; Showalter et al., 2019). Additionally, rural schools and districts have remarkable levels of variability in terms of racial, ethnic, cultural, and geographic compositions. These contexts provide significant motivation for further explorations of rurality and school choice. This review is not intended to advocate for an expansion of school choice policies. Rather, we aim for it to serve as a call for additional research that seeks to better understand how school choice policies are currently operating in rural areas and their implications for educational equity. To advance toward a robust research agenda for rural education and school choice, we review the existing literature on school choice and rural education, provide key recommendations, and assert the need for additional consideration of the following: critical socio-political histories and theories; methodological diversity; issues of race, racism, sexual orientation, and equity; social-emotional learning and development; impacts of the COVID-19 global pandemic; and broadened understandings of rurality.

Rurality and Education

Defining Rural

Based on the U.S. Census data, the National Center for Education Statistics (2006) provided a useful set of definitions that exhibit how rurality is traditionally conceptualized (see Table 1). While geographic context is integral to understanding conceptions of rurality, we also contend that racial, ethnic, and cultural perspectives play a significant role in identifying and explaining the role of rurality in education. For example, O'Hare (2009) explained that rural America is not a monolith, but instead encompasses "the Appalachian Mountains, former sharecroppers' shacks in the Mississippi Delta, desolate Indian reservations on the Great Plains, and emerging *colonias* along the Rio Grande" (p. 4). Although this depiction of rural America has its own shortcomings (i.e., a deficit-oriented lens that focuses on poverty), it provides a succinct description of the diversity of rural contexts. It also illustrates the necessity for researchers to incorporate the lived experiences, counter-narratives, and *testimonios* of all who comprise rural communities in the United States.

Education in Rural Contexts

Though work on rural education and school choice is limited, extant research shows that rural communities are vibrant and diverse spaces with substantial opportunities for better understanding the ways that children and families navigate decisions related to school choice. When compared to each other, several challenges that rural educators face are strikingly similar to those in urban contexts. Herzog & Pittman (1995) explain that schools in rural areas often face high levels of poverty and subsequently low levels of educational attainment (p. 1). Many are increasingly forced to navigate shifting racial and ethnic compositions, language barriers, and the struggles of meeting all students 'needs with

Table 1
Rural Geographic Definitions

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

National Center for Education Statistics urban-centric locale categories (2006)

dwindling public financial supports (Arnold et al., 2005). Like their urban counterparts, rural districts often suffer from teacher retention issues with significant shortages of teachers willing to teach all subjects, particularly math and science (Goodpaster et al., 2012). While these challenges appear to be daunting, it is important to note that rural communities are also uniquely positioned with significant strengths that aid in their ability to meet the needs of their students and families.

A consistent theme in rural education research is the notion that rural communities are tight, close-knit spaces with deeply meaningful connections often spanning generations. Rural students regularly note how this quality of their school community allows for greater access to and engagement with extracurricular opportunities (Schafft, 2016). Many educational reforms that are ubiquitous in urban and suburban districts bear close resemblance to educational experiences in rural communities. These include smaller class sizes, relationship-building between educators and students, and greater contextualization and real-world applicability of concepts being taught in schools (Dunn, 2001). Like urban families, rural families readily engage in school choice options. Historically, these options have primarily been limited to homeschooling and private school enrollment. However, rural communities are increasingly viewed as ripe opportunities to expand school choice options for parents, including charter schools and cyber academies (Beck et al., 2018; Stuitt & Doan, 2012). In the following section, we provide an overview of school choice policies to frame the subsequent development of a research agenda for rural education and school choice.

A Brief Review of School Choice Policies

School choice policies in the U.S. trace their ideological origins to Friedman (1955), who theorized that a free market of publicly subsidized educational options through vouchers (later expanded to other choice options like charters) would create a more efficient educational system by increasing competition and thus forcing lower performing schools to close (Chubb & Moe, 1990). Proponents of school choice argue that by allowing for more local autonomy, education systems can be more democratic (Chubb & Moe, 1990). Competition within the public education market is theorized to increase both fiscal efficiency and educational outcomes, including in rural areas (Gronberg et al., 2012; Henig, 1995; Smarick, 2014). Today, school choice encompasses a multitude of programs that are aimed at allowing families to select a school that best fits their students' needs (Potterton et al., 2020; Yoon & Lubienski, 2017). Choice programs range from open enrollment, magnet schools, charter schools, private school choice through vouchers and tuition tax credits, and homeschooling (Berends et al., 2011).

Controversies in choice

Broadly speaking, debates around school choice revolve around two arguments: that it produces better learning opportunities and leads to better student outcomes (Betts 2005; Chubb & Moe, 1990; Feinberg & Lubienski, 2008), and that by providing access to higher quality schools for students of color and low-income students, it reduces inequality (Chubb & Moe, 1990). However, Berends (2015) reviewed two decades of research on school choice and found mixed results regarding academic achievement.

In terms of open enrollment programs, Welsch and Zimmer (2012) found that participation had no relationship to student achievement, while Wang et al. (2018) found mixed results in student outcomes for magnet school participants. Some work on charter schools has suggested that they can outperform

Table 2
Search Terms and Results

Search Term	Number of Results
Rural education and school choice	14
Rural education and charter schools	9
Rural education and homeschooling	4
Rural education and inter-district choice	12
Rural education and private schools	1
Rural education and town tuitioning	1
Rural education and vouchers	4
Snowball method	6
Total	51

traditional public schools (Betts & Tang, 2011), but much research in this area has found mixed results (e.g., CREDO, 2015; Molnar, 2015; Toma & Zimmer, 2012) or no effect of charters on student achievement (Furgeson et al., 2012; Gleason et al., 2010). Lubienski (2003) argued that while there is some innovation in the area, charters over time come to resemble traditional public schools (see Lubienski, 2016). Additionally, studies showing positive effects of charters are generally limited to large urban centers (Abdulkadiroğlu et al., 2011; Hoxby et al. 2009).

Cyber schools as a whole under-perform both traditional public and brick and mortar charter schools (Molnar et al., 2015; CREDO, 2015; Finn, et al., 2016). For example, a Pennsylvania study found that 98% of students transferring into cyber charters entered into a lower-performing school than their sending traditional public school (Schafft et al., 2014). Private school choice is associated with mixed results as well. Some research has shown neutral or positive effects of private school choice on student outcomes (Egalite and Wolf, 2016; Shakeel et al., 2016), while statewide studies have pointed to negative outcomes (e.g., Figlio and Karbownik 2016). Regarding homeschooling, Ray (2017) found overall positive effects of homeschooling on student achievement in a limited review of empirical literature. However, Lubienski et al. (2013) argued that homeschooling scholarship is often based on faulty assumptions, lacks methodological rigor, and provides scant evidence that homeschooling provides better student outcomes or reduces inefficiencies when compared to traditional public schools. In the absence of randomized controlled trial (RCT) studies or national, large-scale empirical scholarship that has shaped debates around charter schools and vouchers, homeschooling as a choice option should still be considered a largely understudied topic without sufficient empirical evidence across diverse geographic locales.

While there is ongoing considerable debate as to the impact of school choice on student achievement, a growing line of scholarship has argued that choice creates or reinforces racial and socioeconomic inequality (Lareau & Goyette, 2014; Roda & Wells 2013; Sattin-Bajaj, 2014; Stroub & Richards, 2013). The information needed to engage in school choice is not available equally to all families (Scott, 2005), and school choice systems often reflect the needs of upper-income families (Cucchiara, 2013), such that wealthy, well-resourced, White families are more likely to use their choice options (Beal & Hendry, 2012; Sattin-Bajaj & Roda, 2020). This has resulted in broad concern over the demographic composition of charter schools (Zimmer et al. 2009), which may reproduce patterns of school segregation by race and class (Frankenberg et al., 2010), as well as by disability status and income in cyber charter schools (Mann et al., 2019).

Methods

Similar to other comprehensive literature reviews, we employed a search methodology that focused on collecting all literature that specifically explored rural education and school choice, using Google Scholar as our primary search engine. Due to differing conceptions of rurality across international contexts, we only included literature that focused on rural education and school choice in the United States. These results included peer-reviewed journal articles, policy briefs, reports from advocacy organizations, books, and dissertations. After an initial review, we collectively decided to limit the review to only include peer-reviewed journal articles, reports, and

Table 3
Results by Type

Literature Type	Number of Results
Journal Articles	35
Policy Briefs	2
Reports	3
Total	40

policy briefs. As we reviewed each result, we also used a snowball sampling method that included studies or reports that were cited within the articles reviewed. Our initial search specifically included the search terms shown in Table 2. After removing the books and dissertations from the dataset, our sample included 40 results. The sample includes results spanning 29 years, from 1992 until 2021. The vast majority of the results represent results published during or after the year 2000.

The results were then distributed among the members of the research team. We chose to center our individual reviews around several criteria that we collectively found most important, including: methodology, theoretical frameworks, conclusions, intended audience, and explicit or implicit conceptualizations of rurality. Once each team member conducted their review of the literature, we met to share our individual findings, discuss commonalities across the literature, and align our collective understanding of the missing concepts, frameworks, and methods among the literature. In the following section, we explain the results of this analysis related to the criteria we identified as critical for developing this research agenda.

Researcher Positionality

As researchers, we are cognizant of the ways that our individual positionalities within the world significantly impact how we engage with the literature and conduct research (Milner, 2007). All members of the research team are graduate researchers at a private, urban research university. Our mutual interest in the ways that educational policies, particularly school choice policies, impact historically marginalized communities is critical to this work. Ultimately, we acknowledge the connectedness between urban and rural school systems and their challenges (Tieken & Auldridge-Reveles, 2019) while maintaining that the rural schooling landscape is unique and requires specific

attention in order to promote meaningful education policy in rural communities.

Findings

Prevalent Methods/Methodologies and Intended Audience

Our analysis revealed a plurality (44%) of the manuscripts included in the review were either conceptual pieces, literature reviews, policy briefs, or commentaries on rural education and school choice. As the vast majority of the pieces were published in peer-reviewed research journals, the literature that we reviewed unsurprisingly appeared to be developed and disseminated with educational researchers and policymakers in mind. Empirical studies of a strictly quantitative nature comprised 28% of the empirical work, while 21% of the studies used qualitative research methods. Only three studies (8%) used a mixed-methods approach. The quantitative studies that we reviewed largely employed survey analyses and regression analyses, in addition to one study that engaged in geospatial analyses. The sample of qualitative studies proved more methodologically diverse, with researchers engaging in statutory analyses, qualitative case studies using semi-structured interviews and historical analyses, and ethnographic methods to a lesser extent. The mixed methods studies combined survey methods, document analyses, semi-structured interviews, and analyses of district-level enrollment data.

Conceptualizations of Rurality

Hawley et al. (2016) assert that researchers attempting to define rurality across multiple disciplines have struggled to settle on a consensus regarding what exactly defines rural spaces. Unsurprisingly, we noticed similar trends in our review of the literature. Rural spaces were regularly described using deficit-based framing. Researchers detailed the challenges that rural communities faced as they were largely poor and lacked both the

financial resources and attention shown to urban and suburban communities. Rural communities were described as consistently in need of additional support due to their geographically isolated and economically distressed locations.

However, we noticed an interesting geographic spread of the rural contexts that were included in these studies. While many included locations in the rural South (i.e., the Mississippi Delta, Georgia, and North Carolina), there were also studies that focused on school choice policies in Maine, North Dakota, Ohio, New York, and California. This indicates a more expansive understanding of rurality than previously expected. Further, while there were some commonalities across the sample related to understandings of rurality and geographic contexts, there were few explicit explorations of rurality in the varying racialized contexts throughout the country. Primarily Latinx rural areas along the border between the United States and Mexico were rarely discussed, while Indigenous populations (those living on or off reservations) throughout the United States were completely missing from the articles we reviewed.

Key Arguments

The key arguments presented in the literature that we reviewed are remarkably similar to those present in the broader literature on school choice. This is striking given the emphasis in rural education research on the unique context of rurality and the need for tailored policies that address the specific needs of rural geographies. Researchers primarily focused on the need to expand school choice, using arguments related to educational equity, parental choice, local control, and framing school choice through the lens of neoliberalism. Similar to research on school choice in urban contexts, several researchers framed their arguments and implications in clear economic language that revolved around the concepts of supply and demand. The advocacy organizations that were largely responsible for the policy briefs included in this review were staunch advocates for expanding school choice policies as a mechanism for addressing the systemic issues facing rural communities, including persistently high levels of poverty and decline.

While many of the pieces included in this review were generally supportive of school choice policies and initiatives, several scholars were significantly more wary of the expansion of school choice in their analyses. School choice communities were framed as neoliberal projects that negatively impacted the centrality of schools being the center of rural communities (Corbett, 2014). Johnson and Howley (2015) argue that many of the Obama-era federal policies that aided in the expansion of school choice initiatives (Race to the Top, School Improvement Grants, etc.) were inappropriate for rural schools and communities because they were "...policy decisions informed by a neoliberal agenda and ignorance of rural realties" (p. 223). Cervonne (2017) provided a particularly unique critique that integrated understandings of the ways that the maintenance of fundamentalist Christianity in rural contexts and neoliberal initiatives related to school choice have converged in a broader movement to destabilize education as a public good, based on growing mistrust of public institutions. The key arguments advanced by literature we reviewed were mixed in their support and evidence for the effectiveness of school choice in rural areas. Yet it was not our aim to establish that choice accomplished the aims of its supporters; rather, we seek to establish a research agenda that can address the unique needs and challenges of choice in rural areas.

Three studies specifically focused on issues of racial segregation and school choice in rural contexts but drew significantly divergent conclusions. Grady and Hoffman (2018) argue that funding to support homeschooling, charters, vouchers, and virtual schools has fostered a re-segregation within the Deep South that reflects the segregation academies of post-Reconstruction. Suitts (2019) assert that libertarians and segregationists have co-opted the movement for "better schools" and equity by pushing a school choice movement that further marginalizes students of color. However, using data from a qualitative study of a rural charter school in the South, Mann et al. (2019) argue that the community's purposefully integrated charter school "...offers the possibility for meaningful change" (p. 571) related to racial equity. The key arguments presented in the literature thus far provide us with important context as we propose an innovative and comprehensive research agenda for rural education and school choice in the following section.

Widening and Imagining: Landscapes for Future Research in Rural School Choice

Sprawling rural spaces occupy much American terrain. Yet as we have shown in this exploratory literature review, rural schools remain undertheorized

and underimagined in contemporary education choice studies. This paper is an attempt to widen our collective imagination regarding rural education and choice. In what follows, we sketch out a research landscape, building on prior scholarship and current debates around rurality and choice, motivated by contemporary issues of COVID-19, Black Lives Matter, and climate change disasters. Our research agenda is organized around seven themes: (a) fit and family priorities, (b) issues of equity: race, special needs, gender, and sexual orientation, (c) cyber, virtual, and distance learning, (d) marketing and recruitment, (e) centering the social-emotional, (f) school structures, organization, and leadership, and (g) theory, methodology, and methods.

Choosing in Rural Spaces: "Fit" and Family Priorities

The first theme for a rural school choice research agenda focuses on how and why families opt into school choice programs. We begin here for historic reasons. A major promise of the school choice movement was that autonomy and innovation at the local level would produce better schools—safer, academically superior, and more tied to community needs—for students and families (Chubb & Moe, 1990). Indeed, Albert Shanker, a prominent teachers' union leader, is credited with first supporting charter schools as teacher-run laboratories where imaginative innovations would benefit students, staff, and communities (Kahlenberg, 2007). Yet scholars are increasingly concerned about the motivations of charter school operators, and to a lesser extent, voucher programs (DeBray et al., 2014; Wells et al., 2002), arguing that the school choice sector may be troubled. Others suggest that charters may be places that are safe and life-affirming (e.g., Wilson, 2016). These scholarly arguments have been made primarily within urban contexts.

Studies indicate that rural parents may choose to attend charter, inter-district traditional schools, or virtual schools because of convenience or a better fit with family needs. For example, students may attend schools in a neighboring district, exercising inter-district choice, because the new school is closer to a parent's place of employment, as one study found (Delaney et al., 1995). With the exception of one study (Johnson & Brophy, 2006), we have limited evidence that school choice options are exercised because of academic and non-academic factors alike;

how, and to what extent, these goals are met in rural spaces remains under-examined in extant literature.

In a study examining the closure of a rural school, Post and Stambach (1999) found deep tensions in the purpose of schooling. Dueling ideas about schooling revolved around the ideology of efficiency and of creating a larger community of a consolidated school and grassroots efforts to homeschool students and create a charter, reflecting the competing American value of the ability for "families to define their own communities" (Post & Stambach, 1999). Studies that examine rural parents' and students' reasons for choosing school choice policies and programs might be considered an area of nascent research, relying mostly on survey methods. A paper using critical policy analysis to analyze rural school issues examined federal policy (Johnson & Howley, 2015), finding that federal reforms ignore rural realities. We suggest there is much room to improve, and that researchers might consider ethnography and case study as two qualitative methodologies suited to examine parent and student choice.

Equity in Rural Choice Programs: On Race, Special Needs, Gender, and Sexual Orientation

Race, racism, and segregation are major themes in education research; our literature review on rural school choice was no exception. In a literature review on homeschooling, Ray (2017) noted that race played a factor in 60% of African American parents' reasons for choosing homeschooling. He found that 40% of parents suggested wanting more instruction on Black history and culture, and 20% wanted to avoid racism in schools (Ray, 2017). Articles that explicitly focused on race or segregation examined mostly Black-White segregation and racist practices in school choice (Eckes, 2006; Grady & Hoffman, 2018; Mann et al., 2019; Suitts, 2019), with one article examining school choice in a Latinx community (Prins, 2007). No rural choice papers focused on Asian-American, Indigenous, or Newcomer/Immigrant populations.

We offer an additional insight to a widening landscape of rural choice research: a need to examine issues related to gender and sexual orientation. Our literature review was devoid of studies that included considerations of gender or sexual orientation. This matters in all school contexts, but may be especially relevant today, as COVID-19 school closures isolate youths in all locales more than ever before. Several

decades ago, Matthew Shepard, a young gay man in Laramie, Wyoming, was left to die, alone (Brooke, 1998). A symbol of the need for hate-crimes legislation, he was recently laid to rest at the National Cathedral (Hauser, 2018). How are school choice policies advantageous to queer youth? Or students who identify as transgender or gender fluid? Research suggests that students may attend virtual schools, in part, because of issues related to bullying (Beck et al., 2018); how, and to what extent, cyber schools may serve as protective environments for queer rural youth is an area of needed research.

Special education was examined in two studies in our set. Delaney and colleagues (1995) examined the participation of rural students with disabilities and rural gifted students in open enrollment, concluding that most parents transferred to a different school district because the new school was a better fit for their child's special needs. Schafer and Khan (2017), in a study of homeschooling and flexischooling (partly homeschooled, partly enrolled in school), found that parent decisions were shaped by location, family structure, income, and background. This quantitative study revealed that urban parents were more likely to choose flexischooling, and rural parents to choose homeschooling (Schafer & Khan, 2017). Thus, the two studies examining rural choice and special education looked at inter-district choice and homeschooling. We know little about how the needs of special education students intersect with charter school policies, for example. This may be a fruitful area for future research.

Beyond Brick and Mortar: Cyber, Virtual, and Distance Learning as Choice in Rural Areas

Cyber, virtual, and distance learning are areas for future rural choice research. One area of school choice that may be grossly unexamined is distance education, which came up in two different studies in our review (Hannum et al., 2009; Hobbs, 2004). Distance education can be used to enhance curriculum available in rural areas, and many rural schools depend on distance learning to meet the requirements set forth by federal policies (Hannum et al., 2009). We wondered, is distance learning a form of choice exercised by rural districts, or a mechanism through which to meet accountability metrics? The two papers on distance learning fail to address this issue, but this may be an area for research, for how school choice takes shape in rural geographic areas may differ significantly from school choice in urban areas, which occupies the thrust of school choice research, and education research writ large (Schafft, 2016).

One burgeoning area of school choice in rural areas is exercised through cyber or virtual academies. Mann and colleagues (2019) found that cyber charters are the mechanism of choice for parents in rural districts in Pennsylvania. The authors sound an alarm that this is concerning, given the poor educational outcomes associated with cyber charters. For 98% of students, transferring to a cyber charter meant transferring to a lower-performing school in math. Yet the students who are transferring are more likely to come from low-income schools and have an IEP. Structurally, the authors also point out that cyber charters may erode the community-building role of rural schools more generally, arguing that "rural schools are often the largest employer in the areas they serve, they help strengthen community identity, and their presence is associated with a number of social and economic benefits including lowered poverty rates, increased real estate values and higher levels of local entrepreneurship (Lyson, 2002; Schafft, 2016; Tieken, 2014, as cited in Mann et. al., 2019)." Further, these scholars find that the result of moving to cyber charters could be, "a weakening of the role of local rural schools in their ability to provide the "social glue" that helps to hold communities together, foster community commitment to local education, and enhance civic community" (Mann et al., 2018).

Only one study examined parent and student reasons for choosing cyber schooling. Drawing on a mixed methods study conducted in a mid-Atlantic state, Beck and colleagues (2018) determined that parents and students had different reasons for choosing cyber schools. They found that rural *parents* chose the cyber school for structural (flexible schedule, parent decision) reasons, whereas rural *students* choose to attend for curriculum (broader choice, more personalized), and possibly behavioral (problems, special needs, bullied) reasons. Geography played a part in decision-making, with students in rural regions more likely than suburban peers to choose the cyber school because of curricula.

Another area of research that bears more study is equity and access to cyber networks. Grady and Hoffman (2018) describe broadband access in poor, isolated rural areas as a major barrier to school choice. It is possible that in the COVID-19 era of remote learning, these inequities may be reified or exacerbated. Further research is warranted.

Marketing and Recruitment in Rural Schools of Choice

Evidence abounds that school choice marketing and recruitment—and parental reasons for participating in choice programs—is complex, political, and nuanced (Cucchiara et al., 2011; Cucchiara, 2016; DiMartino & Jessen, 2014; Ellison & Aloe, 2018; Jabbar, 2015; Jessen & DiMartino, 2020). The bulk of this work was conducted on and with urban school choice populations, which differ from rural choice populations.

One exception is a study by Eckes and Trotter (2007). This qualitative study sampled charter leaders from urban and rural areas both, finding that "although most of the charter leaders expressed an interest in diversifying the student body composition of their schools to some extent, their overall mission was to create schools that would foster academic achievement that was not otherwise available in these communities" (p. 83-84). In other words, charter leaders in this study recruited not for diversity but for overall high-academic achievement. Eckes and Trotter found that recruitment looked different in the rural Arkansas context, where the leader "recruits by word of mouth, but the community where this occurs is so small that everyone is already aware of the charter school and its high academic achievement" (2007, p. 83).

Delaney et al. (1995), in a study on open enrollment practices in Minnesota, found that 58% of parents learned about open enrollment options through radio, television, and newspaper sources; 34% through school administration, and 31% through friends and neighbors. This study has several limitations. First, it is nearly three decades old. School choice has expanded exponentially since then; we also suspect the internet may play more of a role than, say, newspaper sources. Second, the students sampled were mostly White, with Black students missing entirely from the study sample. How school choice programs—including statewide virtual schools—attract and retain families is an area where more research is warranted.

From Behavior Problems to Love: Centering the Social-Emotional in Rural Choice Research

Society, and the schools that are microcosms of it, is under enormous stress. The current economic crisis shifts the way we work with many experiencing job loss, which leads to housing insecurity. We ask researchers to join us in wondering: how might rural students, choice or otherwise, be affected? Schafft (2006) analyzed how housing insecurity might show up differently in rural areas:

> Mobile students are often not thought of as homeless, given that mobile students and their families in rural areas often do not fit urban homeless stereotypes. Homelessness is less visible in rural areas, frequently entailing a range of housing-insecure circumstances, including more or less temporary living arrangements in inadequate and/or unsafe housing and ''doubling up'' with friends or relatives, arrangements of which the school district may be completely unaware (p. 229).

Rural choice research might examine issues of mobility and homelessness, further bolstered by current economic crises.

We further expand our interest in housing insecurity, mobility, and current economic crises to fold in a broader research interest of ours: grounding studies of educational policy in theories of care and love (e.g., Noddings, 2015; Rivera-McCutchen, 2019). Academic outcomes were examined in a number of studies, and yet behavior, social-emotional factors, or climate were mentioned as causally linked to school choice by parents and students alike (Johnson & Brophy, 2006).

This is not a new tension or concern in rural or school choice studies. In a conceptual piece for the *Peabody Journal of Education* on rural community well-being, Schafft (2016) described this disconnect between academic accountability policies, writing that "schools have become less and less accountable to the communities they serve, and instead increasingly accountable to institutionally determined state assessment goals" (p. 149). We suggest that one avenue for research is rooted in moral and affective concerns of love and care, away from more technocratic, bureaucratic mandates involving discipline, behavior, or control. This research would mirror urban studies that examine the roots of affective policies (e.g., Turner & Beneke, 2020) missing in the rural choice space.

School Structures, Organization, and Leadership in Rural Choice Programs

School choice programs are a product of ongoing, politicized debates, where policy ideas are worked out among competing coalitions (Holyoke et al., 2009; Kirst, 2007; Vergari, 2007). The policy

solutions are crafted in state capitals, far removed from students and families, urban and rural. More attention has been paid to the creation of school choice laws and policies than how rural school choice policies are structured and led. Thus, school structures—how they are consolidated, organized, and managed—is an area for future research. In our literature review, relatively few papers explored issues of school structure, organization, and leadership. This is a rich area for future research, as previous scholarship indicates that students and families choose schools and programs of choice, in part, because of structural reasons (Beck et al., 2018).

Leadership of school choice programs is another recommended area for future research. One econometric study indicated that leaders in Georgia used their positions of power to encourage White students to "remove their children from public schools," (Keeler & Kriesel, 1994), potentially increasing or maintaining segregation. Writing about her experience in one rural school district that services three unincorporated communities, Budge (2006) described a need for a critical leadership of place, "expand[ing] the notion of leadership for social justice and equity beyond the current emphasis on closing the achievement gap...to one that demonstrates an understanding of the interdependence between people and the places in which they live". Indeed, recruitment of rural leaders within choice sectors may be one way in which to increase asset-based, collective visions for wellbeing.

A robust ethnographic study in a California rural area found that intra-district school choice programs disadvantaged Latinx students, and benefited White families and students (Prins, 2007). While there is certainly room for replication of these studies, we wonder, how are leaders making sense of programs and policies? Sensemaking theory (Weick et al., 2005) is used widely in education policy studies to illuminate how individuals conceptualize, and make decisions about, particular issues. For example, Bertrand and Marsh (2015) drew on sensemaking theory to show how teachers' understandings of assessments had equity implications, especially for English Language Learners. Rural choice research presents a scarcity of sensemaking theory, or any major theories that hail from sociology.

Reimagining Theory and Methods in Rural Choice Research: New Directions

This literature review included 40 articles on school choice in rural schools. While exploratory in nature, our review indicated gaps in extant literature. Our previous six themes—fit, equity, cyber schools, marketing, love and care, and school structures—emphasized promising areas for research on topics that have the potential to impact rural families and communities. Our last and seventh theme, reimagining theory, methodology, and methods encompasses and builds upon prior research agenda topics. We offer fresh ideas for research, with implications for policy and practice.

Our first recommendation is to infuse rural choice research with emancipatory knowledge, drawing on indigenous ways of knowing. In their award-winning treatise on educational policy, Sonya Douglass Horsford, Janelle Scott, and Gary Anderson delineate two approaches to the practice of research: a technocratic knowledge framework, and an emancipatory knowledge framework (2019). A technocratic knowledge framework, they argue, uses a linear, chronological process of knowledge creation, dissemination, and utilization (Horsford et al., 2019). Conversely, an emancipatory knowledge framework is a simultaneous, dialogical process, with knowledge creation, circulation, and enactment existing as a multidirectional, agentic process (Horsford et al., 2019). Perhaps because of its origins in an entrepreneurial market ideology (e.g., Friedman, 1962), we find that the bulk of school choice rural research falls squarely into the technocratic knowledge box (for exceptions, see Jaramillo, 1999 and Prins, 2007). That is, school choice advocates, hardly unbiased, overwhelmed our literature review with pro-school-choice policy and issue briefs that leaned on a technocratic knowledge framework, penned by outsider, privileged nonprofit firms (see Smarick, 2014; Stuit & Doan, 2012).

Moreover, we found no evidence of research-practice partnerships in our set of research papers, despite their rising popularity in education research writ large (see Coburn & Penuel, 2016). Indeed, research-practice partnerships may be interesting avenues for realizing this and other research agendas. Research-practice partnerships may also be better suited to situate rural school choice research in the assets and knowledge of rural communities. Current literature that draws on research-practice partnerships occurs in urban contexts (e.g., Biag, 2017; Quartz et al., 2017). Rural universities and consortia were oddly missing from our literature set as well.

Another recommendation is to widen methodologies and methods used in rural school choice research to center student and teacher voices. Considering students and educators as leaders and knowledge-bearers is a more recent turn in emancipatory research, ranging from participatory action research methods (Peltier, 2018; Singh, 2013) to incorporating student voice through photo elicitation studies (e.g., Luttrell, 2013; Prosser, 2011; Walls & Holquist, 2019). Emancipatory paradigms may be well suited to the assets of rural communities, focusing on the community collective. Only one study in our literature review includes student voice (Beck et al., 2018). This study, which utilized a mixed methods approach (survey analyses, fieldwork, and interviews), concluded that parents and students have different reasons for choosing cyber schooling.

Most of the studies in our literature review were atheoretical or conceptual in nature. We found a handful of policy briefs, a concentration of conceptual essays, and empirical studies lacking theoretical underpinnings. Education research does not always rest on theory (Kezar, 2005), and yet in Prins's (2007) study, which was grounded in critical race theory, we concluded the findings were more credible, robust, and compelling than other studies in our review. Another exception was a study on flexi-schooling children with disabilities, rooted in sociological family economic theory, which shed light on institutional arrangements that contribute to families' choosing flexischooling (Schafer & Khan, 2017). That is, theory helps to illuminate problems in new and interesting ways, aids readers in narrowing in on particular aspects of larger, "wicked" issues, and is part of the socially constructed process that occurs between readers and researchers (DiMaggio, 1995). We suggest here that this socially constructed process of theory use in research ought to be used to illuminate injustices. Rural choice research might draw on the insights of scholar Bettina Love (2019), who writes that, "Without theory most of us, not just White people… [have] their vision impaired by hate, racism, and White supremacy; they cannot see Black joy or Black humanity" (p. 148). In sum, in service of dismantling oppressive systems, theory, and in particular critical theories, should undergird rural choice studies.

Finally, researcher reflexivity was missing from many rural choice studies. Reflexivity or positionality, defined as "critical self-reflection by the researcher regarding assumptions, worldview, biases, theoretical orientation, and relationship to the study that may affect the investigation" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 259), offers researchers an opportunity to increase research credibility and validity (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). We noted earlier that all of the policy briefs in our study were produced by research outfits situated in the Washington, D.C. area, yet what of the researchers that are producing knowledge in the rural choice space? Kathleen Budge (2006) in an article published in the *Journal of Research in Rural Education*, described her researcher positionality:

My rural roots are inextricably linked to my identity. The physical geography of the place—mountains, lakes, rivers—richly enhanced my childhood. Generational connections, strong community cohesion, and a pride in 'taking care of one's own' were all a part of living in a rural community and contributed to a personal identity with place that continues to mark how I conceptualize who I am in the world (p. 3).

Similarly, Esther Prins (2007), in discussing the methods used in her study published in the *Journal of Latinos and Education*, wrote:

I was also an advocate during this study, a role that reflects my commitment to conducting research that benefits less powerful groups… My fluency in Spanish and my previous work with Latino/a immigrants in the United States and with campesinos/as in El Salvador helped me establish trust with staff and local residents, especially Spanish-speaking and undocumented immigrants who may have questioned the motives of a White university researcher (p. 295).

Researcher reflexivity or positionality is a critical tool in realizing a more emancipatory, equity-oriented research agenda for rural school choice. In reimagining a research agenda for rural choice studies, we believe that theory, more expansive methods, and researcher reflexivity can be powerful tools.

Concluding Our Research Agenda

We see much hope and promise in the future of rural school choice research. This agenda offers glimpses into a research future that centers equity and caring, that honors rural knowledge and assets, attempts to correct research gaps, and builds on existing research in rural education. We offer seven recommendations for a research agenda—reconsidering fit, equity, cyber schools, marketing,

care and love, school organization, and theory and methods—seeking to elevate and widen rural choice studies. As school choice policies continue to expand into rural contexts, we believe that these recommendations can serve as a guide that points researchers in a direction more suited for equitable experiences and outcomes for rural students and their families.

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Authors:

James Bridgeforth is a PhD student at the University of Southern California. Contact: jbridgef@usc.edu.

Kate Kennedy is a PhD candidate at the University of Southern California. Contact: katekenn@usc.edu.

Jacob Alonso is PhD student at the University of Southern California. Contact: Jacobalo@usc.edu.

Taylor Enoch-Stevens is a PhD candidate at the University of Southern California. Contact: enochste@usc.edu.