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### PAROCHIALISM OR PRAGMATIC RESISTANCE? THE ROLE OF COMMUNITY- ENGAGED LEADERSHIP, ACTIVIST SCHOLARSHIP, AND VULNERABLE RURAL ECOLOGIES WITHIN SCHOOL REFORM

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#### Abstract

This study examines how rural school and community leaders in one of the most rural areas of the United States are able to collaboratively design a grassroots school reform initiative to address inequity issues related to childhood poverty and trauma. Through interviews conducted with advisory board members implementing the reform effort, as well as our own reflections as activist scholars, our work suggests a) the value of rural leaders protecting their vulnerable ecologies against reform initiatives “from away”; b) difficulty creating spaces to support the protection of vulnerable ecologies and address rural inequities; and c) the need for activist scholars to partner with communities for transformation. As such, we challenge the notion of rural resistance to reform efforts being parochial and reposition this work as pragmatic in response to decades of economic and spatial marginalization. Additionally, we highlight the importance of activist scholarship in rural school-community leadership to ensure development of resilient ecologies that do not perpetuate patterns of repeated exclusion.

**Keywords:** rural school reform, rural education, school-community partnerships, social design experiments

#### Introduction

Top-down reform efforts in the United States (US) public education system remain politically contentious as accountability efforts continue to be imposed on local education agencies through state and federal mandates. Although these policies purport to increase attention to equity, they often exacerbate existing inequality by being insensitive to the challenges of implementing them across diverse contexts (Giroux, 2011; Harvey, 2005). Contemporary approaches to US education policy-making emphasize the belief in the power of market-driven reform to solve inequity (Mette, 2013; Schafft, 2010). Moreover, US rural school districts are often at a disadvantage regarding the distribution of money and benefits which come with federally

funded programs, struggling to fulfil the expectations of policies foregrounded on the presupposition of dense settlement and thriving local labour markets (Schafft, 2016). As a result, rural school organizations in the US are limited in their ability to use such programs to enact meaningful, locally responsive changes in their schools (Johnson & Howley, 2015).

Gutiérrez's (2016) conception of the *vulnerable ecology* (p. 187) describes the situation that many US rural school leaders find themselves navigating as they attempt to balance mandated school reform efforts with local imperatives for student and family well-being. Vulnerable ecologies are those in which systemic inequity has become the defining feature, such that both social and environmental well-being are compromised without substantive, locally responsive intervention that values the voices of local stakeholders (Guajardo, Guajardo, & Locke, 2017; Gutiérrez, 2016). For many rural places, throughout the US and globally, there has been a steady loss of stable industry and opportunities for work, causing youth out-migration in search of educational opportunities or living wage, and resulting in communities that struggle to support local economies as well as declining property values leading to aging populations and little in-migration (Bailey, Jensen, & Ransom, 2014). More specifically, Native American communities often find themselves disadvantaged in these rural spaces after centuries of social exclusion and attempted assimilation enacted through reservation systems that have suppressed cultural and community identities (Deweese, 2014).

Although schools may be branded as sites of hope within these ecologies due to their role in developing the civic efficacy and human capital of a community's youth, rural school systems face a difficult task of providing education that drive economic opportunities for rural youth to stay in their rural communities rather than 'learning to leave' (Corbett, 2007). The notion of community resilience, whereby members of rural communities consolidate resources and social capital to drive community improvement efforts, is important when considering how rural places respond to socio-economic changes (Cheshire, Esparcia, & Shucksmith, 2015). As such, there is an opportunity for leadership in rural US communities to reconsider the paradigm of rural education opportunities and strength; however to accomplish this task requires the creation of a space for community members to examine the values and stories that connect communities (Guajardo, Guajardo, Janson, & Militello, 2016; Militello, Ringler, Hodgkins, & Hester, 2017). This paper highlights our work as critical scholars, specifically as we engage in activist research that empowers community members to deconstruct and reconstruct politically-informed advocacy work (Hale, 2006; Guajardo et al., 2012). Specifically, we sought to create a space where rural communities can create counter-narratives to federally imposed school reform efforts and instead place value on local context, strengths of rural communities, and the interaction between schools and local community to produce community development benefits, similar to the work detailed by Gill (2017) and Lúcio and Ferreira (2017).

There are several examples in the literature of ways in which school-community partnerships and community-engaged leadership can provide opportunities for rural schools and districts to be more responsive to community needs (i.e. Cheshire et al., 2015; Harmon & Schafft, 2009; Miller, 1995; Schafft, Alter, & Bridger, 2006; Tieken, 2014). However, doing so requires the ability for these leaders to negotiate the tension between the educational and economic conditions that dictate their vulnerability and to support the expansion of their community's resilience (Reid, 2017). This paper examines how a partnership effort between schools and community leaders in an US rural county, specifically an area with several Native American reservations, developed in an attempt to create new school reform efforts to meet the diverse social, economic, and educational needs of the region. Specifically, the partnership explored in this paper, Rethinking Education in Rural Settings (RERS)<sup>1</sup>, was created to address issues of childhood poverty and trauma in one rural US county. To help focus and facilitate some of these discussions, we

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<sup>1</sup> A pseudonym to protect the project and requested by the RERS advisory board

exercised our own activist scholarship to help create a space where educational and community leaders can engage in leadership that can be deliberate and purposefully identified to impact the public good and enhance the quality of life in schools and communities (Guajardo et al., 2012). Using this activist scholarship paradigm, we explore our work as it relates to how community-engaged leadership can be reconceptualised to play a role in a rural school reform initiative, where school and community leaders actively reject market-based school improvement efforts and participate in protecting the vulnerable ecology of their rural school systems.

## **Literature Review**

This literature review provides an overview of rural White and Native American ecologies within the US, focusing on the way that these populations are affected both by the insensitivity of educational reform policy to acknowledge the importance of rural context, as well as the economic and spatial marginalization of rural places. Consistent with the conceptualization of the vulnerable ecology, the focus here is on how systems contribute to creating vulnerability within these communities. Our work seeks to better understand the agency and beliefs of rural educational and community leaders who want to remediate these vulnerabilities. As such, there is a need for school and community leaders to have a framework through which they can develop and implement a school-community partnership that engages stakeholders in collective activism for the good of the community (Guajardo et al., 2017).

### ***The Impact of Economic Marginalization and School Reform on Rural Education Systems***

Twenty-first century rural communities are often positioned as the economic periphery to an urbanized core (Lobao, 2014). In a globalized economy, this positioning designates rural communities in an increasingly urbanized world as the site of resource extraction for energy, food, natural resources, and reserve labour in the form of youth out-migration (Corbett, 2007; Schafft, 2016). These perspectives marginalize the economic health and social wellbeing of rural communities, as many rural municipalities in the US have struggled with economic decline and rising poverty within their communities (Sherman, 2009; Sherman & Sage, 2011). Moreover, childhood poverty rates are highest in rural America (U.S. Census, 2010). In rural areas, fractured networks of social service provision across wide geographic areas contribute to the need of low-income rural families to depend on rural school systems to provide resources and social services for their children (Berry, 2014). However, this practice sometimes reinforces the common misconception in the US that those in poverty are there due to their individual choices because of their lack of work ethic and lack of valuing education, and not because of the economic and social conditions that are embedded within public institutions and policies (Lareau, 2011; Sullivan, 2011; Swanson, 2001). In rural areas in particular, stigma attached to accessing government-sponsored social services can disrupt low-income families' access to other types of social support through informal channels (Sherman, 2009).

Due to the erosion of economic opportunities in rural communities, rural leaders often express ambivalence about helping students develop the knowledge and skills they need to obtain a competitive job in a global economy (Sherman & Sage, 2011). Rural youth, too, feel this ambivalence early and are able to articulate the difficulties associated with choosing to leave their community for work or college, even in high school (Petrin, Schafft & Meece, 2014; Carr & Kefalas, 2009). Additionally, the lack of post-secondary opportunities that are geographically proximate to rural communities create challenges to college attendance, particularly for low-income families because of exacerbated college costs, transportation, and lack of social support in a new location (Hlinka, Mobelini, & Giltner, 2015). As a result, the focus of contemporary education reform efforts can feel like a mismatch for rural schools, particularly around school

reform initiatives that focus on workforce training that does not support economic development in rural communities.

Additionally, federally driven school reform policies within the US are problematic for rural schools on several levels. Most school reform policies encourage market-driven approaches to improving school outcomes, many of which marginalize minority, low-income, and rural students since the rural schools systems that support them often have little political economy to advocate for change that meets their community or cultural needs (Biddle, Mette, & Mercado, 2018; Mette & Stanoch, 2016; Scott, 2011). Since the passage of No Child Left Behind in 2001, studies have documented the challenges of using high-stakes accountability to spur equity in education in US rural places. Fluctuating enrolments in small rural schools influence the accuracy of test-scores (Goetz, 2005) and federal regulation of certification requirements makes it difficult to employ people with local expertise and understanding (Mette, 2014; Eppley, 2009).

Additionally, education policies often decrease teacher and school leader willingness to try critical performative pedagogies, such as incorporating locally and culturally responsive approaches into their teaching (Azano, 2011; Azano & Stewart, 2015) and often increase instructional approaches based on rote memorization (Mette, 2013). This may result in schools and educators neglecting students' culture, academic and emotional growth, community context or needs, and student creativity, as contemporary school reform approaches to further student achievement often hinder democratic pedagogies (Giroux 2011; Sleeter, 2011). The hyper-focus on student achievement can be especially damaging to rural communities that support diverse racial and cultural populations, such as Native American students, since schools enrolling culturally and ethnically diverse students might be better supported through increasing culturally relevant pedagogy, involvement of parents, and encouraging access and support for college (Mette & Stanoch, 2016; Brayboy & Maaka, 2015).

### ***The Impact of Education Systems on Tribal Communities***

Native Americans have a long history of injustices perpetuated by White settlers and their descendants, including but not limited to the forced removal of children from their families by state child welfare systems. Within these state systems, Native children were systematically taken from their homes to attend boarding schools and abused and neglected in attempts to assimilate them to the culture, language, and values of the White community (Roppolo & Crow, 2007). From a Western and typically White perspective, state systems are seen as central to maintaining organizational, economic, social development, and cultural identity. However, many of these same state systems exercise extreme jurisdiction and control over indigenous minority groups to systematically impose cultural norms (Maybury-Lewis, 1997). Even with the growing amount of research and literature on the cultural genocide of Native Americans at the hands of the Euroamerican education system, Native Americans have the lowest levels of educational attainment among ethnic groups in America, and little changes have been made to Native American school systems to alter what many feel as Western cultural reproduction and White political hegemony (Locke, 2004).

For numerous Native American children, low educational attainment reflects both the economic marginalization of their community, with few economic opportunities in and around Native American reservations, as well as a lack of culturally relevant education (Mette & Stanoch, 2016). For Native American students, the history, culture, and natural environment of the communities they reside in often have embedded memories of trauma, injustice, and marginalization. As such, a majority of Native American students often report feeling issues of identity and a sense of alienation due to a lack of shared values, culture, and history, particularly in rural communities (Donavan, 2016; Hale, 2002). Currently, outsider imposed initiatives, usually advocated by both federal and state governments and the Bureau of Indian Education (BIE) schools, have often

failed to capture the values of indigenous knowledge, particularly local knowledge to empower groups of people to drive their own development rather than top-down governmental structures (Faircloth, 2009; Fischer & Stoddard, 2013; Hamm et al., 2010; Roppolo & Crow, 2007; Tsethlikai, 2011; Zeichner, 2010). For instance, federal regulation of certification requirements makes it difficult to employ people with local expertise and understanding, which limits opportunities for Native Americans to be teachers in BIE schools (Eppley, 2009; McCarty & Lee, 2015; Sloan, 2007). Standardized curriculum also makes integrating place and culture of Native peoples in a meaningful way more challenging (Azano & Stewart, 2015; Kincheloe, 2009; Locke, 2004; Zeichner, 2010).

Although the BIE has some autonomy with how federal educational policies are implemented in order to meet various tribal needs, the policies and programs implemented by the BIE are similar to federally market-driven efforts and disregard cultural context or pedagogies (Kincheloe, 2009; Locke, 2004; Zeichner, 2010). Moreover, BIE tribal schools continue to be underfunded, and often are unable to provide the educational resources that more affluent suburban and urban public schools are able to provide (Hardin, 2012; Johnson & Howley, 2015). Additionally, neoliberal education policies, like *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) and the Common Core, continue to fall short of the goal of helping students achieve at higher academic levels, particularly for Native American students, and many BIE schools are labelled in "need of improvement" (Barley & Wegnar, 2010; Johnson & Howley, 2015; McCarty & Lee, 2015). These federal policies that are implemented and advocated by the BIE often are technical solutions that do not take into account cultural considerations of many young Native American children and their families (Faircloth, 2009; Hardin, 2012; Kincheloe, 2009; Locke, 2004; Mette & Stanoch, 2016). Often this impacts how Native Americans perceive their place in rural communities, as graduation rates for Native youth nationally are at 49% (versus 76% for White students), and suicide rates amongst Native teens are the highest of any group in the nation (Tingey et al., 2014). In order to ensure academic success for all Native American students, school systems must be able to develop and support culturally-based education, foster parent-involvement, further language and cultural teachings, and increase the number of Native American educators (Demmert, McCardle, Mele-McCarthy, Leos, 2006; McCarty & Lee, 2015).

If Native American students are to incorporate indigenous knowledge and cultural values in their education, Native scholars argue that community leaders, educators, and researchers must be able to analyse, deconstruct, and recreate an education system that is historically steeped in assimilation (Wexler, 2006). An ongoing struggle for Native American school systems, however, is to help indigenous students navigate various cultural values as they progress through the socialization process of the American PK-12 school system, but not having to take on a "White" identity (Buckley, 2004). Thus, if communities seek to honour cultural differences and serve as sites of resistance that protect the vulnerable ecologies experienced by many Native American students, communities and educational leaders must challenge the status quo of, typically White, state-based education systems and policies that further marginalize diverse and rural communities and schools (Mette & Stanoch, 2016; Shumaker, 2007).

As such, the ability for rural educational leadership, from the school and district level, to engage with community leadership to strengthen school-community partnerships, and to support social, racial, and cultural diversity that exist throughout rural America, is crucial. For school-community partnerships to be successful in helping support school reform efforts in both non-Native and Native American communities requires improving the capability for local Native leaders to take part in, implement, and evaluate educational programs to align cultural and pedagogical values (Ambler, 2006; Ball, 2004; Lambe, 2003; Villegas, 2016). Moreover, there is a need to identify contradictions between Native and non-Native paradigms and beliefs about education and lived experiences, and for non-Native community groups to serve as allies for fellow Native American nations to lead their own school reform efforts (Faircloth & Tippeconnic, 2016; San Pedro, 2014).

## Context of Study

Lafayette County<sup>2</sup> is a rural community situated in the Northeastern United States. The county is sparsely populated and takes upwards of three hours to drive from one end to the other. Historically, the county has depended on agriculture, forestry and fishing for economic sustainability; however, in the past few decades, the near elimination of traditional industries has left few opportunities for community members to make a living wage. As a result, the percentage of families and children experiencing poverty has steadily risen, with the current unemployment rate the highest in the state. Consequently, as is the case in many rural communities, youth have migrated to larger towns and cities as evidenced by continued negative Lafayette County population. Currently the county encompasses 38 schools and serves approximately 3300 students.

The county has a rich and diverse history, as it was originally the ancestral land of the Dawn Waters, a Native American tribe who make up 5% of the demographic population of Lafayette County. The county serves as the site of a reservation for the Dawn Waters people, called Sunrise Point<sup>3</sup>. The Sunrise Point Comprehensive Plan of 2014 revealed significant economic disparity between this community and the county; nearly half of all individuals in the community live below the federal poverty level, and the mean income is one-third less that of the county as a whole. This demographic data shows Native Americans to be the poorest ethnic group in the Northern state studied. Most Dawn Waters children attend public schools on the reservation that are run by the Bureau of Indian Education (BIE), and most educators employed by the BIE funded schools are non-native. There is also a housing crisis on both Dawn Waters' reservations due to lack of adequate buildings, an increase in population over the past couple of decades, and increasing school enrolment. Moreover, there is a history of distrust between the tribe and non-Native communities based on racial discrimination, crime, and conflicts over fishing and hunting rights as promised through treaties with the US federal government.

Starting in September of 2015, a group of researchers from multiple institutions across a rural Northern state in the US came together as a research team to participate in a locally-grown community leadership effort in rural Lafayette County called Rethinking Education in Rural Settings (RERS). RERS was started around the same time that the *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA) replaced *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB). ESSA returned some power to back to states and local communities, allowing for more individualized responses on how to improve under-resourced schools by allowing for changes in determining how schools evaluate student achievement, including the use of portfolios, among other changes (Hirschfeld Davis, 2015). However, as with NCLB, ESSA continues to favour urban and suburban schools who have larger student populations and thus have larger budgets to respond to these market-driven reform initiatives (Baker, Sciara, & Farrie, 2010; Johnson & Howley, 2015; Kincheloe, 2009; Sloan, 2007). As such, rural communities and their public education systems remain vulnerable to outside influences that have very little contextual understanding of the needs of rural students, families, and community members. RERS attempts to mitigate top-down influences of outsiders by centring local voices, contexts, and cultures.

The goal of RERS was to support both the non-Native and Native American communities in Lafayette County and to develop a comprehensive program that successfully leverages schools, as one of the few rural social institutions, to address issues of childhood poverty and both psychological and historical trauma in Lafayette County communities. An advisory board consisting of 22 stakeholders from schools, social service organizations, local institutions of

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<sup>2</sup> A pseudonym

<sup>3</sup> Both Sunrise Point and Dawn Waters are pseudonyms to protect the identity of the members in this study, which was offered to and accepted by members in the study

higher education, and Dawn Waters tribal members was recruited and brought together in order to provide leadership to the initiative. The advisory board has held monthly meetings with the goal of developing common understanding of the problem, discussing the purpose and design for such an initiative, and hiring a project director to work with schools and the community. In order to help focus and facilitate some of these discussions, as well as collect baseline data on this community organizing effort, as activist scholars who are part of the research team, we worked with the advisory board to design a study that captured their perceptions of leadership issues related to the project.

### Theoretical Framework

This study is informed by Gutiérrez's social design experiment (SDE) approach to remediating and reclaiming agency within vulnerable ecologies. SDE is a social justice-centred form of inquiry that empowers community members through the creation of a 'third space' to reframe community characteristics that have traditionally been viewed as deficits, and repositions these differences as strengths that will drive social change (Gutiérrez, 2008). This interventionist approach calls on school and community leaders to examine the historical and cultural influences that drive inequities within their communities, while invoking their social imagination to design interventions that will remediate their vulnerability (Gutiérrez, 2016). A primary assumption of SDE is that communities can learn to develop resiliency by coming together to think about how to sustain their community, transform it with social and economic supports, and confront the local reproduction of historic inequities within their community (Gutiérrez, 2016). The approach to this study specifically locates schools as a site of transformation within this process, suggesting that it is through the transformation of social organizations, such as school districts and local community groups, that stakeholders within communities see themselves as empowered to make important and lasting changes. Therefore, school leaders are meant to play an important role in the SDE approach.

Two primary values of the SDE approach are a focus on strength and systems. The focus of proposed changes do not place blame on people – such as teachers or students in underperforming schools – but rather shifts to changing how the social institutions of a community are organized to better support individuals within the community. Thus, value is placed on thinking about how to best support rural communities, while recognizing their vulnerability given the current insensitivity of educational reform to local context and an economic system that positions rural places as sites of extraction for resources and reserve labour (Corbett, 2007). The asset-based approach of SDE is particularly important given the ways in which 21<sup>st</sup> century rural identity often coalesces around a narrative of loss – loss of population, loss of business, or loss of community traditions.

As an inquiry-based approach, SDE calls for research to play a role in community transformation and suggests that strong, interconnected working relationships that value place and community be at the centre of this research (Guajardo, Guajardo, & Casaperalta, 2008; Guajardo et al., 2017). *As the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house* (Lorde, 1984, p. 110), research cannot expect to help make needed social change without disrupting and changing traditionally accepted methodologies, particularly the positioning of the researcher as an impartial observer whose work is to observe phenomena impartially. As researchers in this study, we were invited by the RERS advisory board to participate in helping collect data that would drive the vision of a rural school-community improvement effort. An explicit part of this work, then, has been working in partnership with community and school leaders to develop *equity-oriented forms of inquiry to develop an approach that seeks to transform social institutions and their practices through mutual relations of exchange with constituent people as valued stakeholders and partners* (Gutiérrez, 2016, p. 192). As such, we position ourselves as critical scholars who are engaged in activist scholarship by creating space and place for RERS members to examine values of the

work, give feedback to one another about the RERS process, and explore shared stories that connect community members and value local context (Guajardo et al, 2016; Militello et al., 2017). Our work seeks to partner with rural educators and community members to develop counter-narratives of federal school reform policies by listening to the voices and stories of community members, educators, and tribal members. Specifically, our activist scholarship provides an important counter-narrative to the deficit thinking that surrounds rural education.

## Methods

Our activist scholarship examines how school leaders and community organizations in Lafayette County have been able to participate in a SDE approach to address social inequities (Hale, 2006; Guajardo et al., 2012), specifically about childhood poverty and related trauma, racial segregation, and historic trauma. As such, it is important to address our own positionality within this study. We each bring different perspectives and experiences to our activist scholarship, particularly how we serve as allies to various disenfranchised rural communities. This includes our racial/ethnic backgrounds (one Latina, one White female and two White males, our sexual identities (one gay male), and our spatial identities (one grew up in the state studied, other three are 'from away'). Additionally, two of us are first generation college students, and our educational backgrounds navigating education systems helps inform our activist scholarship as well. We became involved with the effort because of the desire of RERS to use an inquiry-model, informed by the values of the SDE approach, to drive the planning and design of the intervention. Specifically, the purpose of our work is to better understand how school and community leaders, through the third space created by the RERS advisory board, conceptualize supporting sustainable and sociocultural approaches in community improvement efforts that attempt to bridge the divide between school and community and respond to education problems. What we present here reflects an effort by us, as critical scholars, to help the group gain clarity in its work through conducting individual interviews with members of the RERS advisory board in order to capture their understanding of the vulnerable ecologies in Lafayette County. The following questions guided our work:

1. How do rural educational leaders and community leaders conceptualize the opportunities and constraints of engaging in locally responsive school reform?
2. How do rural educational leaders and community leaders envision the creation of spaces and places to address historic inequities around issues of poverty, trauma, and racial and spatial marginalization?
3. What can critical scholars engaged in activist research learn from a SDE school-community partnership?

All 22 members of the RERS advisory board were invited to participate in a 60 to 120 minute semi-structured interview. At the start of our work, the RERS advisory board consisted of four Dawn Waters community members, six community group members, six educators throughout Lafayette County, and six university-based faculty. Sixteen members agreed to be interviewed, including teachers, school leaders, members of the Dawn Waters tribe, representatives of social service organizations, and individuals from a variety of other community groups, including local institutions of higher education. The protocols we used for the interviews focused on the social construction of community at the county level (Creswell, 2013; Herr & Anderson, 2015) as well as the historical context (McIntyre, 2008). We were also interested in understanding the perceptions of educators in the school system, social service providers in the region, and the Dawn Waters tribe as it relates to their cultural and community needs (Sloan, 2007; Stoecker, 2013). In designing the protocol, we consulted with other members of the advisory board, drawing from a collaborative inquiry tradition in order to stay true to the values of SDE. While SDE does not specify a particular approach to power-sharing between researchers and the community, the design was inspired by the collaborative, participatory-activist paradigm for research design that emphasizes sharing power by viewing community members as equal

partners in collaboration (Sloan, 2007; Herr & Anderson, 2015). A core assumption of our work was not to dictate what is best for the community (Stringer, 2014), but rather to work collaboratively with community members to understand the goals, assumptions, and desired outcomes of the RERS group in order to develop shared language to coproduce meaning and solutions together (McNiff & Whitehead, 2009).

To analyse the interview data, we developed a provisional coding process to identify major initial categories related to school reform that emerged from the interviews, drawing from areas of emphasis agreed upon by the RERS group at the 2016 Winter Retreat. Additionally, the coding process was also guided by the assumptions of the SDE approach, including rurality, insider status in the community, strengths/assets, challenges/deficiencies, racial discrimination, economic inequality, historic trauma, childhood poverty, group dynamics, tribal relationship, spatial inequity, and desired change. By meeting weekly throughout the data analysis process, we refined and expanded the codes, resolved issues of inter-coder reliability, and discussed emerging understanding of the data. Through this initial coding process, major categories emerged from the data and were organized into dimensions and subthemes (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). For the findings presented in this study, we used a member-check protocol to ensure validity by reviewing the emerging themes from the interviews with the advisory board members who were interviewed (Saldaña, 2013). Major themes were shared with the RERS advisory board in order to stimulate additional conversation about the shape that the collaboration was taking and to inform future efforts of the advisory board.

## Findings

Through the interviews with the advisory board members who discussed their hopes and fears for the future of the RERS project, as well as our own reflections, several themes emerged that spoke to the opportunities and challenges of this kind of school-community partnership within a rural context. First, the RERS advisory board perceived their responsibility as community and educational leaders to protect the vulnerable ecologies of both their schools and community from initiatives “from away,” a regional phrase that references both individuals from other locations as well as ideas perceived as being from outside the community. Second, while the creation of the RERS advisory board initiated a third space to address rural inequities and build more resilient ecologies, there was also the perception of repeated exclusion from the Dawn Waters tribe. Third, we share our own reflections as we negotiate the opportunities and challenges of activist scholarship, specifically how our work seeks to support locally led school-community transformation.

### **Protecting Vulnerable Ecologies from Reform Efforts that are “From Away”**

In describing the potential of the RERS initiative, one repeated theme was the importance of the locally-developed reform effort to originate from the community itself, rather than “from away.” One RERS advisory board member emphasized the fact that over the course of her many years in education, she has seen *good ideas that were intended to improve the quality of education experience in our rural schools come and go, but [they] never left an enduring footprint of positive systemic change*. Another advisory board member commented on how achievement-oriented reform reflected a lack of understanding in schools of the stresses of their students’ lives related to poverty and the influence this has on the ability for students to learn:

*Poverty by definition creates more trauma in peoples’ lives and that when you include in trauma the constant toxic stress and you think about the number of children in our county alone who not only have poverty and trauma, but they also have history of in utero trauma because mom’s in an abusive relationship or, you know, were using opiates.... Because of that we have kids who, before they’re even born, have been sort of basted in – baking in –*

*very high cortisol levels where literally the trauma has been flowing through their little bodies before they even get here. So, if you think that you can sort of pack these little kids off to school who sort of have all those issues of not knowing if home's gonna be, you know if you can live their when you get home from school. They may be exposed to other kinds of issues, are there loss of parents because parents are in jail, or living with their grandparents, or, there is so many different things. For those kids to come into the school system... usually having less vocabulary when they enter the school system, and to think that they're just gonna sort of absorb knowledge and be fine focused kids is crazy.*

This highlights the belief of rural school and community leaders that many school reform initiatives do not consider the social service provisions necessary to address the poverty and trauma experienced by rural students and their families.

Not only did the many members of the RERS advisory board suggest that there is a lack of contextual understanding about the lived experiences of rural students as they relate to poverty and trauma, but there is also the notion that many reform initiatives are urban-centric and not intended for rural school populations (Barley & Wegnar, 2010; Johnson & Howley, 2015; Kincheloe, 2009). Many advisory board members also commented that rural schools are negatively labelled as conservative or parochial, when really these systems are trying to implement school reform initiatives that better position themselves to support their students and their rural communities. One RERS advisory board member commented:

*You know, urban schools are very different than rural schools, and I think that would make a difference to people, because I think we have a population here that's very self-sufficient and they don't want something kind of forced upon them, you know? You don't want to say, 'Well this worked in inner-city New York schools.' They're gonna laugh at you and say, 'That's not going to work here.'*

This foregrounds the importance of sensitivity to the differences in rural contexts from other kinds of places (Azano & Stewart, 2015), and the need to carefully plan implementing new initiatives that could be perceived as having been developed in places with different socio-spatial markers that have little regard for some very vulnerable ecologies that exist within Lafayette County. A specific example of the lack of understanding about cultural and capacity differences between rural and urban schools in the US can be found with School Improvement Grant (SIG) funding. Through 2011, the US Department of Education (USDOE) found only 2% of rural and town schools receiving SIG funding were able to select the turnaround model, which requires replacing 50% of the teaching staff, where as 52% of suburban and city schools were able to select the turnaround model (USDOE, 2011). This is not surprising, as rural schools in the US struggle to attract new teachers (Schwartzbeck, 2003), retain quality instructors (Eppley, 2009), have fewer opportunities to attend high quality professional development (Howley & Howley, 2005), and experience unique staffing and budgetary issues.

Interestingly enough, RERS started with several of the advisory board members considering adopting an urban-based model. Many of the constituencies within RERS quickly referenced other federal and state reform efforts (e.g. SIG funding, Race to the Top funding, etc.) that in the past have not considered how size and spatial location influence the ability for rural communities to respond to these policies. As there were no models that relate to how rural schools can best respond to issues of poverty and trauma, the RERS advisory board decided to develop their own rural-based model. The notion of being 'forced' to do something from the outside invokes the long history of outside efforts designed to fix these communities, with little political cachet for individuals in the county to shape how these initiatives look or are enacted. As a result, these perspectives highlight the desire to reimagine the parochial approach to education reform and offer a form of resistance from having to implement urban-centric reform initiatives.

It is likely because of this history of repeated outside intervention that many advisory board members voiced their belief that the initiative needed to be based on listening carefully to Lafayette County student and teacher needs, a theme that was consistently repeated. As one member said,

*I don't think that you would go in and say, "We're gonna change how things are going to be done." I think it needs to be saying, "Guys tell me, what – what are the – your biggest needs as teachers for students that you're seeing. You know, what really makes you sad? What makes you feel overwhelmed? What would you – what would it look like to you if you had all the supports?" And I think that you still are creating change but you're not coming in and saying this is how it's done.*

Similarly, another advisory board member suggested,

*I think if I were to describe it to someone around here, I would say that it is not a canned program that comes in and tells schools how to do things. It is a resource that is meant to be put into schools in a sense of what do you currently have and how do we provide the resources and understanding or implementing or even just better understanding how socio economics affect our students.*

Here, the RERS advisory board place priority on having interventions created by stakeholders in the community. The implication is in order to be successful with the social transformation that RERS is seeking to accomplish by addressing issues of rural poverty and trauma, the focus of the reform initiative should focus on how educators, community leaders, and various stakeholders can create third spaces to address historical inequities. As one advisory board member explained, *It becomes a survival game to try to navigate the problem [of childhood poverty and trauma] instead of finding a way to address it.* Thus, the work of RERS members is not to focus on 'fixing' deficits in their rural communities, but rather on providing a space for agency to emerge where community members can influence how to best support and develop more resilient ecologies.

### **Creating Spaces to Address Rural Inequities: Resilient Ecologies or Repeated Exclusion?**

When considering the creation of more resilient ecologies, particularly the notion of cultural ecosystem that learns to evolve (Cheshire et al., 2015), advisory board members highlighted the importance of the developing RERS approach, which they emphasized ought to capitalize on the strengths of rural communities that value place and relationships. By bringing together individuals who, through their experiences as community leaders in areas outside of education as well as inside schools, the RERS project helps to identify resources, training, and coordination needed to ensure successful implementation of a multi-faceted approach to supporting students and families experiencing rural poverty and trauma. One advisory board member described how RERS, as a space to develop ecologies and systems, has the possibility to create a healthier schools and communities. In his words,

*I understand this work as the work of social ecology. So, I consider [our] work the work of restorative or generative social ecology. We want to be a generative hub. Not the [emphasis his] generative hub, a generative hub, where some great work is happening that has – that spins off into enduring structures or practices or conditions.*

This advisory board member is suggesting the importance of a holistic approach that allows members of a community, rather than outside agencies, to transform the social and economic supports that are needed for local well-being, and identifies this as a key feature for healthy and resilient ecologies. Another member emphasized:

*If we're looking for systemic change we have to think about what constitutes a healthy system. One of the things that constitutes a healthy system is bringing in a great diversity of*

*strengths and capacities and profiles to build the dynamic, [where you] build a system rather than an individual initiative.*

This quote highlights the importance of local, cross-institutional collaborations that encourage new forms of engagement dedicated to a social ecological systems approach where solutions are created across institutional settings (i.e. the community, public schools, and universities).

In order to create more resilient ecologies that value diversity and capitalize on existing strengths, spaces need to be created where multiples voices and perspectives are heard within a community. One member explained:

*If you help people to feel included in the process, help them to feel like they've had a voice, they may not always like what you're doing, but at least they all understand that they've had their opinions heard and counted, [because] you have to have good justification for what you're doing and be able to approach it in a way, obviously, that's not argumentative.*

The notion of including multiple voices and perspectives to empower community groups to make social changes, highlights the need to support more resilient ecologies and resist many of the damaging state and federal educational initiatives that have been forced upon local school districts, especially rural schools and communities. As such, these perspectives are not parochial, but instead are based on the pragmatic belief that blindly implementing reform policy that harms a community and school system is not tenable. The ability to understand, honour, and value the history allows these rural leaders to employ a critical resistance to school reform efforts that do not take into account culture, context, place, and space.

However, there were concerns among some of the advisory board members that RERS may not be able to live up to its mission or promises of social transformation. Many of the advisory board members worry that even if the initiative comes completely from within Lafayette County itself, some teachers, families and school board members would not buy into its importance. As one advisory board member explained:

*There is a certain vulnerability with poverty in this area, too, because there's a lot of pride. People are poor, but they don't necessarily think they are poor. So, you really have to approach it and in a really creative, artful, mindful way.*

Another advisory board member expressed a similar sentiment about the importance of being mindful of the community's value of self-sufficiency, saying:

*People don't want to feel like they're getting a handout. People don't want to feel like someone else is coming in and solving their problems for them. They want to be actively involved in the process of building life the way that they want it.*

As such, there is a fine line that is drawn within the RERS school-community partnership, particularly around the creation of spaces to create more resilient ecologies. On the one hand, there is a need to create structures that empower local stakeholders to honour the traditions of their local ecologies, but at the same time, there is a need to address the rural poverty and trauma that impacts students and families within Lafayette County. This highlights the sensitivity of addressing these issues without omitting local stakeholders from the design of the RERS initiative or unintentionally excluding groups within the process.

A central challenge for rural community groups, like RERS, is to be mindful of power within a SDE process, specifically when creating spaces for groups that Gutiérrez (2016) refers to as *nondominant communities* (p. 187). In Lafayette County, Dawn Waters educators and community leaders have experienced the same spatial marginalization as their White counterparts, but they also have experienced centuries of social exclusion and systematic attempts of assimilation (Deweese, 2014). Moreover, Dawn Waters members interact with US government agencies that provide the state with the discursive tools to absolve itself of its responsibilities to vulnerable,

nondominant communities (Cheshire et al., 2015, p. 14). Specifically, Native American students attending BIE schools in Lafayette County are taught almost exclusively by White educators with little cultural understanding of Dawn Waters' traditions, which in turn reduces the ability to reintroduce and teach historically relevant curriculum that is tied to culture. Due to the fact that BIE schools are funded by US federal dollars that are tied to neoliberal school improvement policies that heavily value student achievement, little seems to change in the educational system of Native American students in Lafayette County. These traumatic collective memories fuel a lack of trust in the intentions of those claiming to offer assistance. As a result, there is a need to acknowledge the collective memories and perceptions of historically vulnerable ecologies. Specifically with RERS, being able to discuss how the RERS community group can take into consideration historical inequities and value diversity in thinking about creating more resilient social ecologies.

However, discussing historical inequities has proven to be difficult for many non-Native RERS members. In almost every interview of non-Native members, comments such as, "I can't speak," "I don't know how the tribe relates to non-tribal community members," or "I wouldn't want to say," were responses offered to questions about the tribal community and its history in Lafayette County. One non-Native advisory board member commented on the struggle to discuss how differences and diversity might be reconsidered to be viewed as a strength of Lafayette County, saying, *I feel like there is a distance between [Dawn Waters] and non-[Dawn Waters] people in [Lafayette County] that's developed over many, many years, that there's an initial lack of trust.* The lack of trust between non-Native and Native communities highlights the difficult work of rural school-community partnerships to collaborate and address power differentials among communities in Lafayette County. As such, it can be difficult for school-community groups to create third spaces that support the creation of nondominant communities rather than reinforcing recursive exclusion.

Although the RERS project clearly articulates the commitment to include the Dawn Waters communities in the process, it is clear that although both Native and non-Native members are interested in acknowledging and raising consciousness of past wrongs with the intention of preventing further harm, White advisory board members remain unsure how to best accomplish this goal. One RERS board member, a Dawn Waters member, commented on the recursive nature of exclusion among Native Americans within the RERS advisory board:

*Well, I mean you know that it's hard when you are trying to assist anyone. Like for example, from the perspective of the [Dawn Water] and [RERS] members not knowing, experiencing the past, is that when somebody offers to help, [they] are somewhat sceptical and – um – resistant to accept the help. Because in the past what that meant was, "We're going come in and take over. And it's going be for your benefit."*

Another Dawn Waters member, who is also on the RERS advisory board, commented:

*We never seem to address [improving educational opportunities] beyond the immediate, so I think that one of the most important tasks that we could look at is to look at that thing and to string it back to the points of origin. Now, that is easier said than done, believe me, but that is how I tend to think... . Yeah, I really believe that that is a very unexplored concept and I wish more people would spend more time at it. I know we are trying to as tribal people with a lot of the stuff that went on even 200 years ago.*

Thus, the ability to confront social inequities in Native communities remains a struggle for the RERS group, despite the intentional effort to be inclusive and also support interventions that empower historically marginalized groups.

While it is currently a struggle for the RERS group to openly address historical inequities experienced by Dawn Waters communities and non-Native communities, there is an opportunity to reimagine, reframe, and recreate the third space provided by the RERS project to include more of the Dawn Waters' members voices. One Dawn Waters RERS member commented on the opportunity for RERS to protect a vulnerable ecology rather than recursively excluding a Native perspective by providing support to preserve the Dawn Waters language:

*Well... in terms of like preserving the language again... you know that's a very deep, a deep wounded, a significant part of every life of [Dawn Waters] people, whether they know it or not. It's who we are. So the language, and you look at any language emersion program out there, I mean I think that's the underlying message that their trying to get out to the broader community is that some of the way that we interpret or internalize is because we're speaking a language that we really don't understand. And that can be brought forward to the [Dawn Waters] language is passed through in kind of a, uhm, like a genetic DNA.... And for us, for the [Dawn Waters] tribe, if that was to happen that would just be so... ahhh... I can't even describe how, how incredibly profound that would be. The profound effect that would have on the people and the tribe, you know? And that we were preserving, bringing back, and using the [Dawn Waters] language.*

Another Dawn Waters member shared a Native perspective living in Lafayette County, and the ongoing and repetitive exclusion from other non-Native communities:

*It affects us, it affects our thinking, affects how we view our surroundings, how we view our fellow person. For example, we were talking about that – anger is a good example, it gets carried forth and I said addiction a little while ago. Certainly survival is another ingredient. All of those things are important in terms of concept of society, a small society and a small village in a rural area. I have learned to express it a little bit better than I used to.... When I talked about it, halfway through my sentence, I used to get really upset and mad, but now I can see it in a different light. What we want to do, I think this is important, is that when we get to a point at this juncture, we want to offer an alternative to the kids that are here and for the kids that are yet to come, for the children that are yet to come. That can be an awfully important ingredient to the work of [RERS].*

These Native perspectives offer examples of how RERS can reposition itself in the SDE process, specifically with how school districts and local community groups can create spaces for critical dialogue by addressing the challenges of understanding, healing, and creating positive relationships between Native and non-Native people their communities. By encouraging non-Natives community members to re-examine their dispositions surrounding the history of systemic privilege, and the injustice and marginalization of Native communities and individuals, community-led initiatives in diverse rural contexts may be able to find a way forward that does not simply perpetuate existing inequities.

### **Negotiating Activist Scholarship to Empower School-Community Transformation**

The work of RERS uses a SDE interventionist approach to inquiry that is intended to empower community members to examine community characteristics that can be viewed as deficits and reframe them as strengths to help guide change to address issues of social justice (Gutiérrez, 2008). As critical scholars who were invited into the RERS work, and who have participated in the creation of a framework that will drive the school-community reform initiative, we believe we have much to share about politically informed advocacy work around school reform efforts that can benefit researchers, practitioners, and policy makers alike. Our participation in activist research has taught us that our work cannot be impartial and objective, particularly when it comes to addressing social, cultural, racial, and economic inequities, but rather requires us to

'lean in' to our work and support the creation of third spaces that empower communities to critically analyse their own historical and cultural influences (Hale, 2006; Guajardo et al., 2012; McCarty & Lee, 2015; Sloan, 2007). In our work to support rural educators and community members in Lafayette County to co-create counter-narratives to the constrictive requirements of US federal school reform policies, as well as address the deficit-thinking narrative around rural education, we have found that it is just as important to understand the shared stories of community members that value local context for rural communities. The ability to support the creation of space for different rural groups to reimagine deficits or differences is, in itself, a type of reform that addresses how communities might re-envision their rural education systems and thus better protect their vulnerable ecologies.

As scholars who have interests in rural education, we were invited on to the RERS project and spent the better portion of two years going to meetings, involving ourselves in the support of the project, and offering our own expertise as academics to support RERS. The advisory board requested that we help document the RERS initiative by interviewing the advisory board, to highlight this work as a process of school and community reform and not an end product to simply implement without context or meaning. In meetings with RERS advisory board members we have shared our findings that we detailed above, particularly the beliefs of advisory board members that RERS should protect the vulnerable ecologies of local rural communities, but also that there was discomfort in speaking on behalf of the Native communities that was resulting in, perhaps unintentional, exclusion. As activist scholars, these have been difficult conversations to start, but as a result there has been more intentional discussion among RERS advisory board members about how to include voices from the Dawn Waters communities and intentionally communicate with both communities about their potential participation in RERS. These conversations have taken into account the difficult position of providing support for Native communities that are sovereign nations, while also acknowledging that BIE requirements can be restrictive when it comes to school reforms (Faircloth, 2009; Fischer & Stoddard, 2013; Hardin, 2012; Kincheloe, 2009; Locke, 2004; McCarty & Lee, 2015).

Through these messy conversations, we believe that, in the words of Audre Lorde, we are helping *dismantle the master's house* (1984, p. 110) through the SDE process that empowers community members to drive their own school and community improvement efforts. Herein lies the great opportunity and challenge of activist research, where there is a possibility to help support community leadership development, and yet there needs to be a very serious awareness not to lead the improvement effort as a researcher. As academics in an educational leadership program, this work allows us to reflect on our own positioning in how we structure coursework and field opportunities for our educational leadership students, many of whom will eventually be in the roles of rural school leaders. The idea of power *with* as opposed to power *over* is particularly important in our own scholarship, as well as the development of our coursework. That said, we openly acknowledge that there is still much work to be done in the RERS group to support the Dawn Waters communities to revision their own concepts of Native education (Faircloth, 2009; Kincheloe, 2009; McCarty & Lee, 2015), particularly the difficult process of supporting the *development of sustainable and resilient learning ecologies for students from nondominant communities* (Gutiérrez, 2016, p. 187).

Through the feedback we provided to the RERS advisory board, and the continued development of a third space to have difficult and messy conversations, the group has asked us to lead focus groups with educators, parents, and students that provide a voice to the stakeholders in Lafayette County to create the RERS framework. We have interviewed over 330 people as part of our work, and in doing so fortified the third space for Lafayette County to share their ideas about how to best transform their communities through the RERS school-community partnership, which include 1) increasing community engagement through the SDE process, 2) increasing access to mental health and social services, 3) supporting student development through social-

emotional learning skills and increasing student voice, and 4) improving student engagement and shared leadership within schools. While the RERS framework development is ongoing, implementation will occur in the eminent future, and the focus of the work will come from the voices of educators and community leaders who are strongly connected through working relationships (Guajardo, Guajardo, & Casaperalta, 2008; Guajardo et al., 2017) and people who are involved in the RERS work that value the past *and* the future of Lafayette County.

## Conclusion

As RERS continues to evolve and create solutions collaboratively among school and community leaders, incorporating diverse and multiple voices is important to consider. By shifting away from an urban-based model and providing a third space for Lafayette County communities, RERS is protecting its rural communities from outside influences that have previously failed, while creating solutions that are designed and created locally. Similar to the work of Gouwens and Henderson (2017), this study supports rural stakeholders being active in their community to determine school improvement efforts that are better informed of local community needs than outside agents (state policymakers). Without an understanding or experience of the systematic ways in which rural places are economically peripheralized and subjected to attempts to repair their perceived cultural deficits, a simple conclusion could be that the protectionism expressed by the RERS advisory board towards outside initiatives to reform their schools was simply parochialism and clannishness. This would be particularly easy to conclude given the cultural dominance of these narratives when discussing small, relatively homogenous social groups, as most rural areas are painted within the collective imagination (Theobald & Wood, 2010). However, the emphasis that the RERS work places on listening to local student and teacher needs, as well as the sense of repeatedly being ill-served by economic and educational systems and policies that fail to consider the contexts of rural places and people (Azano & Stewart, 2015; Schafft, 2016), helps see the RERS school-community partnership as a pragmatic resistance to urban-centric reform initiatives.

In order to allow for social transformation to occur, however, community groups like RERS must incorporate diverse voices that acknowledge the historical, economic, social, and cultural contexts of various rural communities in considering the design *and* implementation of a grassroots school-community partnership. As seen in this study, it can be difficult for different rural communities to transform social perspectives through SDE efforts and reimagine social inequities, particularly when there is a need to acknowledge historically vulnerable communities, such as those of the Dawn Waters. The experiences of Native American members of the RERS advisory board suggest there is an inherent danger to SDE efforts targeting school reform and community improvement, namely if the effort fails to attend to the perpetuation of historic inequities between dominant and marginalized communities on the local scale. Part of any SDE process, including the RERS project, would be to further develop inter-community relationships that allow for a common understanding of the often painful history of Native American assimilation (McCarty & Lee, 2015; Roppolo & Crow, 2007). It is imperative that through the SDE process community members increase their knowledge of the historic nature of their socio-political privilege through critical community discussions pertinent to educating stakeholders, community agents, and educators on the history and current status of nondominant communities (Gutiérrez, 2016; Stone, Walter, & Peacock, 2017), as well as the ability to support community resilience in various ethnic communities (Cheshire et al., 2015). To facilitate dialogue that reconciles power and privilege, critical scholars can participate in activist research that helps give voice to local community members, transform social and economic supports, and create third spaces that help disrupt these recursive practices of exclusion (Guajardo et al., 2008; Guajardo et al., 2017; Gutiérrez, 2016; Militello et al., 2017; Zeichner, 2010).

This study reinforces the notion there is not a one-size fits all approach to rural education reform,

highlighting the need for rural community-based leadership to identify social justice-oriented improvement efforts that take into account historical inequities and empower community members as stakeholders in the improvement effort (Gutiérrez, 2008; Gutiérrez, 2016; Johnson & Howley, 2015). Through our activist scholarship, we believe there is great importance to developing educational leadership that focuses on the political imagination of what can be possible with rural school reform efforts across the globe. Additionally, it is important to mention the difficulty and challenges that bringing together experts from multiple backgrounds and fields to drive school reform efforts has when trying to enact social change. As such, future research should explore these tensions and challenges, as well as how rural school-community initiatives navigate SDE efforts. Moreover, researchers should further consider how students and parents in rural communities can play a role within school-community initiatives or reform efforts. Finally, future research may want to look at how these initiatives develop as a process as opposed to implementing a product, giving voice to marginalized rural communities so they are not further oppressed. Despite the limitations of this study, our work suggests an alternative path to how rural education initiatives may emerge or be developed, specifically through cross-institutional partnerships. Bringing rural education reform efforts back to these communities by making local decisions may have a profound impact on the education within these communities.

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