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Just Southern: Navigating the Social Construction of a Rural Community in the Press for Educational Equity

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Rural communities in the Southern US are shaped by a legacy of racial oppression carried out through educational systems, in tandem with contemporary policies that perpetuate the marginalization of minoritized students. In this qualitative, revelatory case study, we examine the experiences of rural, southern school leaders who are tasked with ensuring educational equity. Using critical place-based leadership and bonding/bridging theory, we examine the social construction of belonging in a rural southern community, and the implications for equity-centered educational leadership. We find the community maintains tight-knit bonding capital that is rooted in land ownership and racial exclusion, which is conceptualized as southernness. Educational leaders who develop bridging capital were best positioned to shift community perceptions necessary to enact educational equity.

One of the most tenacious challenges for the U.S. public education system is the persistent, inequitable achievement and academic outcomes for minoritized populations, including Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and LGBTQ+ student populations, English Language Learners, and students living in poverty (The Education Opportunity Project [TEOP], 2021; Hanushek et al., 2019). Scholarship on leadership for equitable schooling focuses largely on the needs of urban leaders (Green, 2015), as well as the de facto segregation of suburban and exurban communities (Orfield & Frankenberg, 2013). In comparison, scant research is available to support the work of rural educational administrators and the complex school-community interdependence they must navigate (Bauch, 2001; Budge, 2006; Harmon & Schafft, 2009; McHenry-Sorber & Budge, 2018).

The lack of relevant research is particularly salient for the rural south, which has the highest concentrations of racially minoritized students in the country (Showalter et al., 2019). Southern states are also among the lowest performing nationwide; in the biannual report from the Rural Schools and Community Trust, eight of the top ten highest priority states for rural education were southern (Showalter et al., 2019, p. 4 - 6). These rural regions are shaped by a legacy of racial oppression carried out through educational systems (Tieken, 2014), in tandem with contemporary policies that perpetuate the marginalization of minoritized students (Tieken, 2017). Further, minoritized community members' voices are often silenced, potentially enabling

hegemonic narratives about race, class, gender, and sexual orientation to shape schooling practices (McHenry-Sorber et al., 2016; Trujillo, 2013). Rural school leaders must navigate factionalized visions of education, which complexify tensions within rural communities (McHenry-Sorber & Schafft, 2015; Preston & Barnes, 2017).

Despite the critical need to improve educational equity, rural school leaders have scant evidence-based research to inform their work. Our study addresses the critical need for rural educational leaders to know *how* to navigate community expectations to dismantle systemic racism. In this qualitative, revelatory case study, we examine the experiences of rural, southern school leaders—principals and assistant principals—who are tasked with improving student outcomes across race, socioeconomic, and geographic status within the context of their rural communities. In this study, we ask the following questions: (1) how do rural, southern community members discuss educational equity in their communities; and (2) how do rural, southern school leaders tasked with developing equitable school environments negotiate these community narratives? With this research, we aim to advance the field of rural educational research by providing analysis of how rural southern school leaders can negotiate community expectations to create equitable schools in a culture of long-standing systemic racism.

Research Framework

The Rural Opportunity Gap

Historically, disproportionate outcomes between groups of students is referred to as the achievement gap, “when one group of students (e.g., students grouped by race/ethnicity, gender) outperforms another group and the difference in average scores for the two groups is statistically significant.” (NCES, 2020). In this study, we use the alternate frame of opportunity gap (Carter & Welner, 2013; Ladson-Billings, 2006). Carter and Welner write: “The ‘opportunity gap’ frame...shifts our attention from outcomes to inputs—to the deficiencies in the foundational components of societies, schools, and communities that produce significant differences in educational – and ultimately socioeconomic outcomes,” (2013, p. 3). The opportunity gap in the United States is evident across multiple measures, including academic assessments (TEOP, 2021), rates of discipline (Rafa, 2019), school completion rates (Howard, 2019), and under-identification for special education (Morgan et al., 2017) and/or gifted and talented education (Ford, 2014). In the rural south, rural minority students underperform on standardized academic measures (Showalter et al., 2019), are significantly less likely to be identified for gifted and talented programs (Morris & Monroe, 2009), and face higher rates of disciplinary interventions than their non-minority peers (Graham, 2015). Each of these dimensions reflects significant gaps in educational opportunities for rural communities, which have been “plagued by geographic isolation, loss of economic bases, and lack of capital (both financial and political) to voice the need for resources” (Williams & Grooms, 2016, p. viii).

Although rural America is often considered monolithic by nonrural researchers, (Biddle et al., 2019), in reality “rural America is far too heterogeneous and complex to be amenable to simplistic definitions or comfortable stereotypes” (Sher, 2019, p. 1). This heterogeneity means some rural districts encompass significant concentrations of minority students (Showalter et al., 2019; Tomlinson, 2020), such as the southern “Black belt” of rural African American students (Morris & Monroe, 2009) and geographically diverse areas of significant poverty (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2019). Furthermore, rural America is rapidly diversifying (Showalter et al., 2019). Brezicha and Hopkins (2016) note, “many districts’ responses to increasing

cultural and linguistic diversity are often shaped by a history of institutionalized racism in the United States that may further limit change efforts, and especially the involvement of nondominant communities in local policymaking,” (p. 368). Despite shifting demographic trends (Kebede et al., 2021), research and policy have not attended to the opportunity gap for minoritized rural students (Tomlinson, 2020).

Rural Educational Leaders

Though heterogenous, rural district communities exhibit similarities that influence leadership practices, such as low population density and geographic spread (Forner et al., 2012; Tomlinson, 2020). Because rural districts are often smaller districts by population size, they have fewer financial resources and smaller administrative staff (Barley & Beesley, 2007; Grissom & Andersen, 2012). As a result, rural districts have fewer middle management positions to distribute the administrative load, on the district-level (e.g., assistant superintendents, central office staff), and the building level (e.g., assistant principals, instructional coaches) (Forner et al., 2012; Wood et al., 2013). Rural educational leaders are also more likely to operate in a highly visible public role in their communities (Hall & McHenry-Sorber, 2017; Lamkin, 2006).

Aligned with their propensity to serve in a dual capacity as educational and community leaders, rural administrators are critical actors in mediating access to opportunity for minoritized students through the role they play in allocating school resources (Sutherland, 2020), forging community partnerships (Bauch, 2001), and building relationships with local families (Harmon & Schafft, 2009). Such complex navigational work across the school and community requires context- or place-specific leadership practices that respond to the geopolitical and cultural dimensions of a rural community (Rey, 2014; Tiekens, 2017). This place-specific leadership practice further requires an understanding of state- and community-level demands on schooling, which may, at times, reflect competing interests and values across macro and micro levels and within the local community. Schafft (2016) writes:

Public schools are institutions of the state, but mandated to provide services within local communities, run by locally elected school boards, and are also local institutions that help to inscribe the boundaries of community, impart a strong sense of local identity and shared purpose,

and act as important sites of local civic engagement. (pp. 3 – 4)

While common attributes such as lower population density, relatively small schools, and geographic remoteness from urban centers may be valued by rural residents (McHenry-Sorber et al., 2021), they serve to concentrate community attention on public institutions while limiting diffusion of diverse perspectives. Under these conditions, educational values can become calcified into local master narratives—dominant, majoritarian perspectives that center the experiences of whiteness and privilege (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002)—about the role and value of public schooling. Some factionalized communities construct competing master narratives (McHenry-Sorber & Schafft, 2015), while others may coalesce around a single, hegemonic, place-specific narrative (Hall, 2016). Counter-narrative perspectives of minoritized residents may be muted or pushed to the periphery of discourse (Ishimaru et al., 2016), further perpetuating marginalization within the community.

To fully address opportunity gaps in educational systems, rural educational leaders must employ a critical understanding of place-specific dynamics, including master- and counter-narratives. These leaders are tasked with being agents of social change while meeting accountability pressures and community expectations (Ni et al., 2018; Preston et al., 2013). In the following section, we outline the theoretical lenses we employ to situate our understanding of how rural, southern educational leaders implement equitable practices in their schools while negotiating community expectations. The need to respond critically to dominant community perspectives is a foundational element of rural leadership for equity.

Critical Place-Conscious Leadership

We employ the theoretical frame of critical place-conscious leadership, which situates learning within the encompassing community, and leverages community ties to facilitate place-centered collaborations (Budge, 2006; Gruenewald, 2003). Critical place-conscious leadership builds on the theory of place-conscious leadership, wherein educational leaders situate learning within the encompassing community, and leverage ties between the school and community to facilitate place-centered collaborations (Budge, 2006; Gruenewald, 2003). Critical place-conscious leaders build on the

forementioned theory by striving to identify and address injustices or challenges in their local communities through collaboration and collective problem-solving (Budge, 2010; McHenry-Sorber & Budge, 2018).

Empirical research intended to explore critical place-conscious leadership in practice is a relatively new phenomenon. Two empirical studies found place-conscious leadership without critique (McHenry-Sorber & Sutherland, 2020; Rey, 2014). McHenry-Sorber and Provinzano (2017) found critical leadership practices that counterintuitively exacerbated inequities experienced by community newcomers, due to leaders' narrow commitment to social justice that was only for community insiders. This empirical body of research led McHenry-Sorber and Budge (2018) to advocate for a new theorization of critical place-based leadership. Although the focus on community context provides a strong framework for rural equity research, McHenry-Sorber and Budge (2018) problematized prescriptive notions of critical place-conscious leadership and called for revision of the construct:

Critical place-conscious leadership theory should consider the heterogeneity and social inequities within rural communities. Rural scholarship has focused to a greater degree on the inequities between rural and nonrural places than on those found within rural communities. . . . In short, the narrative of rural struggle must be expanded in building critical place-conscious theory. The critical place-conscious leader must be able to critique not only external threats to the community, but internal spaces of privilege and oppression, attuned to spaces of intersectionality of marginalization along gender, class, racial, sexual identity, religious, and other socially constructed groups. (p. 10)

Building on McHenry-Sorber and Budge's (2018) analysis, we seek to expand and complicate the theory of critical place-conscious leadership as a means to interrogate the complexities of educational equity work in rural contexts. To integrate the "internal spaces of privilege and oppression" (McHenry-Sorber & Budge, 2018, p. 10), we also use the theoretical lens of bridging and bonding social capital in this analysis.

Bridging and Bonding Social Capital

One of the key facets of school-community relations are the social interactions between

community members and school staff and faculty (Schafft, 2016). In this study of rural, southern educational leaders, we use bridging and bonding social capital theory to conceptualize and analyze these dynamics. Social capital refers to the value, knowledge, and information assets distributed through interpersonal networks (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988); the enactment of social capital requires trust and association through the groups. Reflecting the variability of social networks, scholars conceptualized two types of social capital: bonding and bridging.

Bonding social capital is evident in cohesive, tight-knit groups, who share common goals or values (Murray et al., 2020; Schafft & Brown, 2003). Groups with strong bonding social capital share common characteristics such as race/ethnicity, social class, language, gender, or religion/faith. In educational research, bonding social capital has historically been constructed as an asset that fosters close relationships and shared knowledge through family groups (e.g., Bryk et al., 1993; Coleman, 1966). However, critical scholarship suggests social capital reproduces inequities (Ishimaru et al., 2016; Murray et al., 2020; Schafft & Brown, 2003). In their analysis of social capital in non-majoritarian communities, Ishimaru et al. (2016, p. 857) write:

In the field of schools, the forms of social and cultural capital possessed by many low-income, immigrant, or other families of color often have less value than the dominant forms of capital that many White, middleclass families possess, resulting in better access to institutional resources and opportunities that preserve middle-class social and economic positions (Lareau & Horvat, 1999).

Larsen et al. (2004) and Murray et al. (2020) conclude bonding social capital is more likely to be maintained by majoritarian groups in educational settings, creating “opportunity hoarding” for privileged families and their children.

Bridging social capital occurs when members of diverse groups connect to share knowledge, opportunities, and resources across networks (Larsen et al., 2004). Bridging capital enables ties across groups that typically do not interact with each other. In contrast to bonding social capital, educational scholars assert bridging social capital can strengthen equity and inclusion in school settings (Ishimaru et al., 2016). Bridging social capital is most effective “in socially heterogeneous communities,” as it “creates mechanisms for groups within diverse

communities to exchange knowledge and resources, making it easier for diverse groups to understand and account for one another’s interests and needs” (Murray et al., 2020, p. 2215).

In rural-specific research, bridging and bonding social capital theory is not commonly used as a theoretical frame. Rather, rural community groups are typically defined along an insider/outsider dichotomy (Biddle et al., 2019; McHenry-Sorber & Schafft, 2015; Miller et al., 2017). Emic identification of rural insiders or outsiders is often based on residency: life-long residents are insiders; newcomers are outsiders (Biddle et al., 2019; Miller et al., 2017). “The close social ties which may characterize rural communities and small towns create an in-group/out-group status that can be hard for those outside the community to penetrate,” (Biddle et al., 2019, p. 2).

However, underlying constructs of social group boundaries are flexible, shifting as community dynamics change (Naples, 1996). In a feminist analysis of rural farming communities, Naples defined the outsider phenomenon as “the interaction between shifting power relations in this rural context and the personal and interpersonal negotiations adopted by residents to resist further differentiation from the perceived community” (p. 84). The enactment of power and privilege through social capital, is “always emanating from context-specific historical, social and cultural forces” (Schafft & Brown, 2003, p. 331). In rural communities, the privileged majority of insiders may include length of residency, race, religion, gender, occupations, and other defining identity features. Insider power and privilege are maintained, McHenry-Sorber and Schafft (2015, p. 735) assert, through master narratives:

In policy debates or times of conflict, othering becomes part of a hegemonic narrative, or a linguistic and conceptual metaphor (Lakoff and Johnson 1980), used ‘to control the identity of a group of individuals for purposes of power augmentation by an opposition group and to foster their policymaking hegemony’ (O’Brien 2009, 30). The more powerful coalition casts the other as an enemy, simultaneously portraying itself as the community’s protector against this threat (O’Brien 2009).

From a critical perspective, then, insider/outsider identifications are a means to delineate those who have power and “belong” versus those who are

marginalized and are “outsiders,” at times irrespective of one’s insider/outsider residency status.

The social construction of groups in rural communities can be defined using bonding and bridging capital theory. Insiders are likely to have strong ties and shared networks of social capital that are typical of bonding groups. Outsiders are less likely to be included in bonding groups, and therefore will require bridging social capital for inclusion. While the use of bridging and bonding theory in rural scholarship is limited, we assert the theory can identify dimensions of power and privilege enacted through insider/outsider social capital (Schafft & Brown, 2003), and can surface master and counter-narratives present in the broader rural school community (Milner, 2007). Furthermore, by overlapping place-conscious leadership theory with social capital theory, we are able to delineate social groupings, power, and privilege, and to understand how these grouping intersect with educational leadership. Educational leaders must understand and navigate the social construction of bonding and bridging groups in their communities in order to enact equity-centered place-conscious leadership. Our research framework serves to enable depth of analysis into the complexities of this work.

Methods of Data Collection & Analysis

The research is designed as a qualitative revelatory case study (Yin, 2017) to examine a previously unexplored phenomenon of how rural southern school leaders navigate community expectations. Data collection includes interviews, focus groups, and observations conducted during the 2017 – 2018 school year.

Site Selection

The case study site is comprised of one criterion-selected (Creswell & Poth, 2018) school district in rural South Carolina. Criteria included geographic locale, racial demographics, and administrator interest. Our site, Lenoir Mills (all names in the study are pseudonyms; the study has IRB approval), is a rural, remote (NCES, 2018) southern community with one K-8 public school. Lenoir Mills is part of a county-based school district typical of the southeastern states. We used both participant definitions (McHenry-Sorber et al., 2021) and NCES locale codes (2018) to identify the site as rural. At the time of the study, approximately 750 students

Table 1

attended Lenoir Mills; 80% of the students identified as white, 18% identified as Black, Hispanic, or multi-racial, and 100% of students qualified for Free Lunch. Most South Carolina school districts are county-based; the selected district includes multiple schools in urban and rural locales. We selected the site for the revelatory case study research as the participating school leaders first surfaced the research problem. They subsequently volunteered their school to serve as a study site, serving as gatekeepers, and co-developing the research questions and some of the instrument protocols.

Data Collection

Data collection took place at the end of the 2017-2018 school year. We interviewed a total of seven participants (see Table 1), including the school principal, assistant principal, school administrative staff, superintendent, school board representative, and other community stakeholders using semi-structured, role specific protocols (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Interviews were approximately 60 minutes long and were recorded and transcribed. We also used semi-structured protocols to conduct three focus groups with a total of 15 family members of children attending Lenoir Mills School (see Table 1). School leaders facilitated purposeful focus group recruitment for socio-economically and racially diverse participants (Yin, 2017). Focus groups were approximately 60 minutes long, were recorded and transcribed. Interview and focus group protocols explored participant definitions and experiences of community, inclusion, and equity in the school. The principal provided a narrative tour of the community, and we observed school-community events to develop thick descriptions and data triangulation (Creswell & Poth, 2018). We documented observations with ethnographic fieldnotes, which we expanded after leaving the field (Emerson et al., 2011).

Positionality

Researching race and rurality in southern contexts surfaces multiple, complex issues that intersect with identity and complicate site access, data collection and analysis (Tieken, 2013; 2014). Sutherland and Willingham iteratively reflected on our respective positionality and experiences in the field, employing Milner’s (2007) framework

Study Participant Roles & Racial Identification

Study Participant Roles	Racial Identification
School administrator: Principal	white
School administrator: Assistant principal	white
School administrator: Other	Black
School Improvement Council Member	Black
School board representative	white
Superintendent	Black
Community leader	white
Focus group: Grandparents	3 white
Focus group: Fathers	1 Black, 4 white
Focus group: Mothers	1 Black, 6 white

for researcher racial and cultural positionality. Sutherland’s positionality encompasses both privilege and peripheralization as white, cis-gendered female from New England. Willingham, as a Black, gender-queer individual who was raised in a metropolitan county adjacent to where we conducted research, acknowledges my upbringing and prior experiences within the community had an influence on my perceptions of equity, race relations, and acceptance of those considered outsiders at the onset of our study. Sutherland and Willingham collaboratively embedded positional reflexivity into our work through discourse and memos (Milner, 2007), using shared understandings to refine the research design. To address potential blind spots in our analytic process, McHenry-Sorber, a white cis-gendered female, led a final data analysis using alternate theoretical interpretations of the data.

Data Analysis

We began analyzing the data of the revelatory case study site, using analytic memos that informed an *a priori* thematic and categorical coding scheme (Miles et al., 2018) for transcripts and fieldnotes. Our *a priori* coding scheme incorporated elements of our research framework (equity, inclusion, power, insider/outsider) as well as emergent, *in vivo* elements. Two of us (Sutherland and Willingham) developed the coding scheme through multiple, iterative discussions about code definitions and parameters. We individually coded the same subset of transcripts, comparatively discussed our code applications, and then refined the codebook (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Our collaborative discourse process enabled us to co-construct a coding approach, and we achieved a high level of inter-rater reliability. We

then documented emergent questions with analytic and descriptive memos (Miles et al., 2018). We iteratively analyzed the coded data for emergent themes and patterns (Creswell & Poth, 2018), then constructed a summative data table to visually organize our findings. We conducted a second round of deductive data analysis to review and refine key themes relative to social capital, constructing thematic data matrices for bridging and bonding capital. To ensure analytic trustworthiness, we triangulated data sources to ensure depth of evidence for each theme, and we identified and included disconfirming evidence (Miles et al., 2018). Deidentified findings were shared with the school leaders for internal reliability (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The leaders confirmed major themes and surfaced additional issues that we have since integrated in a follow-up study.

Findings

Bonding Capital: Who Belongs

Lenoir Mills is a small farming community in close proximity to the county seat, which residents colloquially refer to as “town.” Most businesses are locally owned and staffed by Lenoir Mills residents. One K – 8 school serves the community; local children attend a centralized district high school about fifteen minutes down the road. The school board representative defines it as a tight-knit community:

It’s working-class folks that want the American dream of home ownership, raise a family, and become grandparents, and have grandparents come home on Sunday. It’s a mindset more than anything else, but it’s the work ethic of those

folks. That is something that you can't control from the school side. It's controlled by the community itself."

Residents used terms like "homey" and "safe" to describe the rural community.

Belonging Through Intergenerational Ties to the Land

In Lenoir Mills, bonding social capital is developed through life-long relationships in what participants describe as a tight-knit community. Alternatively, such community cohesion also means the bounds of Lenoir Mills are exclusive.

Generational home- and land ownership is the primary basis for inclusion. Multiple participants noted that younger generations return to Lenoir Mills to raise families and maintain family-owned property. The principal explained, "Lenoir Mills people ... leave very shortly and come back. They build houses here, so they come home when they want to because it's farmland that they've inherited." Established inter-generational relationships contribute to the bonding social capital. "The community support I think is because people know each other," shared one resident, continuing, "You talk about the small-town atmosphere, well this is even more than small-town atmosphere. I played ball with the sons of my parents' friends. My kids played ball with my friends' kids. It's generational." This, in turn, is embedded within the school system, in multiple ways, including early social ties between students and community relationships with educators.

The principal shared a similar assessment of her acceptance by community members: "I grew up with the people whose children I'm educating, so they trust in me because they remember me there, and we just all grew up together." But this trust, however, is not automatically extended to community newcomers; whether student, teacher, or educational leader.

"Lenoir Mills demands honesty, integrity, and they see through it when it's not like that," one resident explained. Trust is frequently discussed as central to belonging in the community, which participants connect to longevity and familiarity in the community. "I feel like the community, they need to build that bond with you before they accept you and are willing to work with you because the community is everything to this area," shared one school administrator. Building bonds is a demand placed even on elementary-aged children in Lenoir Mills. As an administrator explained,

One of the hardest things in Lenoir Mills: if you do not start K-4 there, you have a hard time fitting in because you have these people that move in after the bonds have been tied, and that's usually in elementary school. That's a tough road.... Even in the '70s, a girl that moved in in the fifth grade, she said, "I did not think y'all would ever, ever, ever accept me." It was the hardest thing ever.

Such exclusion exists beyond the institutional bounds of the school, which seems to serve as a site of social reproduction for dominant community values regarding bonds and belonging.

Home and land ownership serve as a boundary to limit who can be accepted into the community and thus become part of the school, with rentals and lower income families serving as verbal proxies for exclusion and race. "The one thing that sets [Lenoir Mills] apart from other rural community-based schools like this, is that trying to rent a home in this school district, you can't. It's very difficult." Yet the sale of property was equally limited, as much of the land has been kept within families for generations.

For those living outside of the community, Lenoir Mills has a legacy of negative external perceptions. When asked how people outside the community viewed Lenoir Mills, a white leader bluntly discussed racial perceptions:

Most definitely white supremacy. And I think a lot of it has to do with just simple perception. Because the properties there have been so handed down generation to generation, and they're white. That Black people just couldn't buy into the community, so they thought they were excluded from the community, the people outside looking in. Not the people who had the money to buy, not [the Evans, a Black family], who have large pieces of land in Lenoir Mills, and are well loved, and well respected.... Not those [Black families], but the ones who did not have the money to buy. There are no projects. There are no affordable apartments, so if you didn't have the money to buy the pieces of property that existed out there, you didn't get properties out there. In town, you can go rent a house on a street, and you couldn't do it out there.

The participant's assessment of the connection between belonging, home- and land ownership, and race is clear, yet it also conveys stereotypical perceptions of Black poverty. Across the US, Black homeowners have been systematically barred from

homeownership through local ordinances, discriminatory lending practices from banks and mortgage companies, and bias during the home purchasing process. While it is likely some Black families couldn't afford to buy homes in Lenoir Mills, a larger system of oppression maintains the racial segregation. For example, during one interview, a community leader discussed his recent land sale which he advertised only on social media. "I must have gotten 100 calls in the first 10 days from Atlanta, from Charlotte, from everywhere that were wanting to move close to [the Capital]. They did not want to move into downtown because they had small kids. They are looking here." The leader explained that he was ultimately able to find a couple who were the "right fit" for the community. This suggests that residency, as acquired through land, is controlled by current community members as to who is and is not allowed to belong. Another community leader noted that "A lot of new people have moved in, but they moved in and embraced what they saw and what they felt in that community."

Bonding Social Capital: Benefits for Students and the School.

Bonding social capital in Lenoir Mills has resulted in some important benefits for schooling, particularly related to community involvement, academic outcomes, and helping children in need. Participants expressed pride in the academic success of Lenoir Mills students. A white community leader shared that five of the last six valedictorians from the district have been products of Lenoir Mills. He noted that this success has persisted despite an increase "over a period of two generations" from "almost non-existent free and reduced lunches" to "well over 70% free and reduced lunches" (at the time of the study, the district qualified for the USDA Community Eligibility Provision, enabling 100% of students to receive free lunches). He explained this continued academic success in the context of increasing reliance on government assistance to bonding capital: "The academics and achievement and community support never changed." This perception was repeated by multiple parents; a white father discussed the relationship between the community and the school, sharing "there is a strong relationship, and we do come to school functions. There is a great turnout by the community at an athletic event or whatever. The school is dear to the community, and vice versa." A Black father confirmed this assessment, noting there "is no lack of parent involvement. They encourage it deeply. I've come and read to classes that my kids

weren't even in... It's just a plus... Kids come up to you, they know you." Another white parent noted particular families within the community who have been instrumental in the school's success. "I don't know if you all remember [the Andrews], but they were a major influence in the science in this school. People like that have really held this place together." Other parents discussed the importance of providing resources so that children with fewer financial resources can participate in field trips, and they help the school with summer feeding programs for families in need. In sum, both parents and community residents repeatedly discussed mutually beneficial relationships between the Lenoir Mills School and the community.

Problematizing bonding social capital.

Color-blind bonds. Bonding social capital in Lenoir Mills is described as assimilation of shared values, so that differences are minimized. Residents, along with school leaders, assert the school should feel like "a family" where all are welcome. Parents and community members employed the family metaphor to promote the inclusivity of the school, while also maintaining the need for "color-blind" educational practices. "If you belong, there's no difference," the principal said. A Black parent also shared the perception of equity at the school:

It goes back to the community, and not necessarily to the school itself, that the community pretty well sees each other as equals. That lessens a degree of inequity. I think it's the same thing comes into the school... I think that mindset from the people that live here create that.

The same parent attributed community cohesion to color-blind bonding: "If you had to give an example of Martin Luther King's dream speech and the dream of all kids being together, it's Lenoir Mills." He continued, explaining "I think so because of the kids' acceptance of one another and not viewing you as just whatever color you are. I think it's one of those things of 'we're all just kids.'"

These color-blind sentiments run counter to earlier participant descriptions of who does and does not belong in the community, or who is welcome to purchase property on the occasion it becomes available. Descriptions of "right fit" for the community become further problematized by simultaneous notions of a color-blind community and school. Economic disparities are recognized, and school structures are put into place, with community

support, to create more equitable opportunities. This recognition seems to flow from community descriptions of “working class folks that want the American dream;” however, recognition of racial difference appears taboo in the narrative of the Lenoir Mills community.

When race is explicitly noted, it is utilized as a way for participants to prove sameness or tight bonds across racial diversity. For example, several school leaders shared an example of “a Black family whose house burned this past year.” One administrator pointed out that a white family was rebuilding the house. Another shared, “If they know the family, and they’re familiar with them, they will pitch in.” Such description suggests community insider status is the marker of community belonging, though other interviews suggest insider status is closely monitored.

Bonding capital as status-quo maintenance.

Insider status is fluid, and community insiders can quickly find themselves on the outside if they stray too far from community norms or dominant values (McHenry-Sorber & Schafft, 2015). In Lenoir Mills, school leaders are expected to adapt to the dominant local culture, despite the significant challenges of being accepted by the community. This adaptation equates, at times, to upholding an exclusionary status quo. The principal, a life-long resident of the community, illustrated the concern when she started leading Lenoir Mills School. “I was afraid that when I went back there, that the connections would be so tight that anytime I told them no, they’d be ready for me to go... I figured that they would just wear me down... It was tough, but I was able to do it.”

Participants in the study were overwhelmingly positive in their assessment of Lenoir Mills school and community. They valued the tight connections among community members, the sense of safety and home in the small, rural town, which they maintained through home- and landownership, and through control of bonding social capital for their social group. This bonding capital led to exemplary student accomplishment and the sustaining of programs and practices designed to mitigate economic disparity. This tightly controlled bonding capital simultaneously led to exclusionary housing practices, a color-blind approach to schooling and community work, and the maintenance of status-quo structures. In the following section, we further analyze and problematize the master narrative of belonging in Lenoir Mills, with a critical perspective on race, racism, and identification as southern.

We’re Southern: Master Narratives of Bonded Community

A major theme that emerged throughout the findings is how those included within the tight-knit social bonds of the community talked about race. We identify the themes from these discussions as the master narrative of racial relations in the community.

The Confederate Flag as a Symbol of Southernness and Community Belonging

The core of the master narrative, as discussed by participants in Lenoir Mills, is the concept of southernness, and what it means to belong to a rural, southern community. Southernness is profoundly explained by a Black father as he discusses his children’s experiences with racism at the school:

They’ve told me things that they’ve heard, not necessarily those things projected to them, but just hearing other kids in conversations... Living here, you see a lot of different things. You see a lot of confederate flags. Now, we’re southern. By the grace of God, a lot of people are southern. It is what it is... Everybody isn’t what they look like. We’re just southern. You’re southern. People believe what they believe, and some people believe ... Some people see one thing and see it as heritage. Some people see it as a form of hatred, but you’re all southern. Y’all put your pants on the same way. Y’all got to go to work. Y’all have to pay a bill. Y’all have to, you know, just make a life and make a way, but it’s just everybody’s belief is different. Everybody’s way of handling things is different. I think here is just blessed that people tend to have the same goal. People tend to have the same mindset.

While this resident seems to have accepted racism in the community as status quo, he also differentiates it from being “southern,” which he views as a common identity across racial difference. The power of Lenoir Mills, or the south more broadly, in this narrative, is that the shared sense of community and common values supersedes beliefs about race and meanings attributed to symbols of the south, including the Confederate flag. This is further illustrated by the school principal, who shared a conversation she had with a Black colleague.

I had no idea that Lenoir Mills had the [racist] perception that it did. And [my Black colleague] said to me, “I would not drive to Lenoir Mills unless I had your phone number, a bottle of water, and a full tank of gas in my car.” And I

said, “Why?” And she said, “Because those are the most rebel flag toting people I’ve ever seen.” I said, “They’re not. They’re really not, but you’ve got to earn their trust.”...and that’s only been about maybe seven or eight years ago. So, that comes up. And there’s a perception out there that if you ask the If you ask the Black families that have been there since the ‘70s, that went to school with us, if you ask [the Evans] and you ask [the Sullivans] and you ask [the Smiths], whose children still go there, you won’t hear that at all. They’re the happiest people in the world.

Within this master narrative, racism is diminished, and attributed to the boundaries of social capital. Those who are trusted and established belong, such as the multi-generational Black landowners. The Confederate flag, a symbol of white supremacy to her Black colleague, is attributed to a sense of belonging as *southernness* by the community insider.

The heavy symbolism and deeply contested meaning of the Confederate flag, coupled with an acknowledgement by some participants that outsiders view Lenoir Mills as a community characterized by white supremacy, prompted one participant to minimize its importance in the community. “One of the funniest black kids from Lenoir Mills carried a Confederate flag in his pocket all the time. It was folded up. He said that one of his dearest friends gave it to him. Lenoir Mills... It is the piece of belonging that you’ve got.” In this example, the Confederate flag, itself, serves as a symbol of belonging in the Lenoir Mills community. Constructing the flag’s meaning in this way is perhaps not surprising given the dominant community approach to social bonding, which relies on color-blindness. If the flag’s meaning is reduced to one of “heritage, not hate,” all community insiders—characterized by generational land ownership—can belong.

Belonging: A Historically Segregated Construct

Within this master narrative, current and historical segregation are minimized by white residents. This region of South Carolina was among the last to desegregate, only coming into legal compliance long after *Brown v. Board of Education* passed in 1956. Multiple participants we spoke with attended segregated schools. A white leader casually discussed racial segregation:

When I was growing up, there were very, very few minorities in this community. African

Americans were the only minorities. There were no Hispanics... The African Americans that grew up here did the same thing I did. They grew up on a farm. They worked farms. We hunted, fished together, then played ball together. Went to school separately. Went to church separately because during that time it was still under a period of time that segregation existed and there was separation.

In this example, the similarities within the community are highlighted, while school segregation is minimized. In particular, community members were bonded by attachment to the land – in their work and leisure activities. For this white community member, such attachment to land created cross-racial bonds that superseded institutional segregation.

Yet racial segregation profoundly shaped the development of community connections, as illustrated by another white resident:

Now we had a place called the Lenoir Mills Recreation Center growing up ... every kid in Lenoir Mills, *white kid* in Lenoir Mills [went there]. There’s never to my knowledge been a Black family member of the Lenoir Mills Recreation Center. Why? I don’t know. Now they may have been in later years, but in my growing up years... But I said all of that to say we bonded as children of Lenoir Mills, that’s where we bonded.

The resident surfaces community segregation but does not examine it in the discussion despite the role the segregated recreation center serves for “bonding” and development of social capital. That Black families and children did not belong to the center is dismissed; white belonging is the central narrative in this community. This further complexifies earlier discussions of color-blind community belonging. In theory, anyone can belong to Lenoir Mills, regardless of race (i.e., everyone is equal, and community families take care of each other across racial bounds); however, true belonging resides in a legacy of racial segregation, through which white community members had institutional and structured opportunities to forge and maintain tight bonds to the exclusion of Black community members. Importantly, these power structures are able to continue to use their social capital to maintain status quo in community make-up and schooling practices.

“Spices to the Gumbo”: Bridging Capital

These tight social bonds and the resulting master narrative of community, in turn, influence approaches to bridging capital for “outsiders.” In Lenoir Mills, outsiders are categorized as those who do not live in the community, such as urban residents, community newcomers, and students from a neighboring town who join the K – 8 school in the middle school grades. Race appears to profoundly shape those who are included or excluded; however, participants are more likely to attribute outsider status, or non-belonging, to geography rather than race. In the following section, we illustrate two examples of the ways bridging capital opportunities are shaped by exclusionary community bonds.

“The Batesville Kids”: The Intersection of Geography and Race

In Lenoir Mills, children from the neighboring town of Batesville attend the Lenoir Mills School for grades 6 – 8. The “Batesville kids,” as described by multiple participants, were perceived to be outsiders by both adults and students at Lenoir Mills. Batesville is very similar to the Lenoir Mills, but the Batesville housing market includes rentals and mobile home parks. A school administrator summarized the demographic differences of the Batesville students: “A lot of them are African American from what I’m hearing. A lot of them are low income. A lot of them are, from what I’m hearing, single parent homes.” Batesville students were identified as a geographic outsider group by multiple participants, while potential race-based dimensions of educators’ relationship to Batesville students and families were minimized. The assistant principal acknowledged that the role of race in the exclusion of Batesville students “might be a possibility, but I haven’t run into it yet.” He continued, “But I can’t say it’s more racial, it’s almost geographical. But even then, I don’t even know if that’s fair to the teachers, it’s more once you’re on the list you’re on the list.”

The exclusion of Batesville students in Lenoir Mills School translated, in part, to disproportionate discipline referrals. At the time of our study, Batesville students represented the majority of discipline reports for Lenoir Mills, particularly from bus drivers. Yet they also spent more time on the bus than those students living in the Lenoir Mills primary catchment area. While the school leadership team agreed that Batesville kids had higher rates of discipline due to longer bus commutes from their

town to Lenoir Mills school, they did not discuss the potential racial dimensions. In fact, one school leader shared that she had not noticed that most Batesville students were Black, in line with the color-blind narrative of the Lenoir Mills community. “When you look at the discipline, it’s not the Black kids, it’s not the Hispanic kids... It’s the Batesville group that are ... the main ones in discipline.” The assistant principal researched the discipline gap between Lenoir Mills and Batesville students and was working on intervention strategies to address the exclusion. Yet there were limited examples of efforts to develop bridging capital between Lenoir Mills and Batesville students, or their families. “Nothing has been done because I hear it year after year after year.... If I’m hearing it for five or six years, obviously, nothing’s being done about it,” said one Black educator.

Lenoir Mills educators appeared to maintain Lenoir Mills community boundaries and status quo structures and practices through their exclusion of Batesville students. Instead of developing opportunities for bridging capital between the two communities, participants reported maintenance of bonding capital. “Your children belong to everybody in the community,” said the principal. “I do believe a rural standard is different, and a community standard is different than everywhere else... Lenoir Mills, they have a set standard for the children in that community. And your children better measure up to it.” Such quotes suggest Batesville children, in the minds of educators, could not measure up to this standard. This language also suggests status quo norms for community inclusion that set up Batesville children for continued outsider status as their “community standard” is not equal to Lenoir Mills.

These exclusionary bonds influenced early socialization of new leaders to the school. When discussing the transition to a new school principal, a school administrator recalled a conversation with staff members about the “need to break [the new principal] in about these Batesville kids.” The administrator was appalled:

That is not the first thing that you should say to a new principal... That bothered me as an educator and as a parent. I’m like, that’s not fair to those children. We have some very difficult children to work with from Lenoir Mills who get referral after referral after referral, so we can’t just say it’s the Batesville kids who are the problem. Yet the administrator’s opinions were in the minority, as most participants stressed that the new principal

should maintain the status quo; or as one declared: “don’t change this community!”

The Promise of Bridging Capital: Creating a Sense of Belonging

While there was little evidence of existing efforts to include Batesville students in the school, several participants offered suggestions to facilitate bridging capital. A member of the School Improvement Council (SIC) recommended expanding opportunities for Batesville families to visit the school, noting parents need to “get to know everyone, and understand the dynamic of the school, and that it’s not a scary place for their child. They don’t have to worry.” Two school leaders recommended expanded transportation options to enable participation in extra-curriculars like football. The principal shared, “It would give them a sense of belonging. Football at Lenoir Mills is a beautiful sport.” Football is also central to community identity in the region, making this a substantive opportunity for bridging capital.

Other participants discussed how bridging capital could be developed for educational leaders with a focus on the well-being of children. One Black parent noted that new leaders “add the spices to our gumbo: there’s people from away, and there’s people from home that helps make the things like it is. It has to be very eclectic.” His perspective, repeated by the school administrative team and other participants, is that newcomers bring more diverse ideas for the well-being of children. This perspective suggests a willingness to engage in bridging at least around student-centric issues or initiatives. However, this willingness is complexified by powerful exclusionary bonds that maintain community bounds and support the status quo, potentially limiting the reach of bridging.

“One of Their Own:” Educational Leaders Changing Mindsets Through Bridging Capital

Throughout the study, we observed participants who deeply loved their community and their school but lacked critical assessment of how race shaped the community, both historically and in current times. The intergenerational community is tight-knit and slow to change, making it difficult for outsiders, particularly educational leaders, to permeate the bounds.

Yet there are signs of awareness and change from educational leaders, including school administrators and school board members. We found

that educational leaders who engaged in bridging social capital were able to articulate not only their community dynamics, but also the needs of racially and socially diverse children and families. For example, the school principal self-identified as a “bridge” between the Lenoir Mills community and the school district at-large prior to her position. “I’ve been the bridge from Lenoir Mills to the high school for 28 years. I was the one that Lenoir Mills people called to say, ‘You think I can get my child’s schedule changed?’ even though I’m not the guidance counselor.” Reflecting, she said:

I do believe that the leader who can transform or can change that mindset and bring them on board has to be one of their own. It has to be, in that community particularly... In that particular community, the person that they raised is who they trust.

In other words, the principal’s role in bridging the Lenoir Mills community with the district also enabled her to transform community perspectives because she was a community insider. During the principal’s tenure, Lenoir Mills School continued to operate as a tightly bonded community, to the benefit of those who belonged and the detriment to those who did not, such as Batesville children. However, we also found evidence of the principal’s efforts to shift perceptions in the community by centering the experiences of children. A Black administrator reflected on the racism in the Lenoir Mills community, acknowledging, “I know times have changed now with the way the world is now, but the community around here for a long time ... [The principal] has changed a lot of the mindsets around here.” From her perspective, the principal, as well as the assistant principal, increased awareness of racial equity in the community.

We also note a transition for a school board member, who identified his shifting awareness of racism as a gradual change through his position on the board.

I just saw a lot of negative and backwards attitudes that made me wish that maybe that I had moved five miles down the road before my child was born. I’ve softened on that somewhat. I realize that the community is the same, and that I just have to have my eyes open. But that was hard for me to deal with. My wife is not from here, and so she didn’t take it as well as I did. ... My experience is of one who has been here my whole life.

In other words, the board member is explaining that because he has been part of the community, he is *of* the community, and understands it even if he doesn't like all aspects. He attributed this change to learning more about diverse communities that encompass the district, as his experiences with bridging capital strengthened his understanding of diversity.

Since I've been on the board, and I started just really trying to identify with people not like me... Some of the kids that aren't necessarily considered by everybody... You can't just stand at the door and say, "You're equal when you get here." That's how I felt when I got here: you treat [all children] the same when they get here. If they see that you care about them, then they will learn. But really it takes more than that. There are barriers that are created by those outside forces that you have to do something... You have to reach out and try to reach every student there.

The rural board member's differentiation of equality versus equity is critical to build change in the district. While it is a small step, it is also heartening to see how a member of the community can develop understanding of those beyond the parameters. The perspectives of these leaders suggest that while change is slow and incremental – because of exclusionary and constraining bonds, color-blind approaches to community identity or the intense maintenance of insider/outsider status – it is beginning to happen in Lenoir Mills.

Discussion & Implications

In this revelatory case study, our aims were to understand how rural, southern community members discuss educational equity in their K-8 school; and how rural, southern school leaders tasked with developing an equitable K-8 school environment negotiate these community narratives.

We found the discussion of educational equity and the related leadership practice constrained by strong bonding social capital linked to generational home and land ownership and complexified by a legacy of segregation. This bonding capital results in a close-knit community whose members describe helping other community members in need, particularly in response to economic disparities or crises, but our analysis suggests these tight bonds are simultaneously exclusive to community outsiders, including children. W participants have crafted a narrative of community characterized by inclusivity

and racial harmony, our analysis of the community's master narrative illuminates the centering of whiteness and the minimalization of racism, achieved in part through a color-blind construction of community. However, this color-blind construction only applies to community insiders, as our data show Black newcomers—both adults and children—must navigate numerous hurdles in order to gain acceptance as community members if, in fact, they can gain inclusionary status. Such status seems attainable through negotiated entry, which requires trust-building acts, time, and sponsorship by community insiders. In the case of educational leaders, esteem and care for Lenoir Mills children is also an imperative. We attribute these seemingly impermeable bounds to the exclusionary nature of tight bonding capital and a lack of bridging capital, a status quo reinforced through a legacy of racism, and segregation, and supported through controlled land and home ownership in the community.

We were challenged, as researchers, to understand why participants of both races, for example, identified as "southern" and defended the heavy presence of the Confederate flag, despite the local and regional histories of racism and segregation, even when their children had experienced racism in the school, or their colleagues had experienced it in the community. Thompson and Sloan (2012) argue this lack of understanding is due, in part, to constructions of southerners, which is overwhelmingly understood as synonymous with whiteness by both scholars and the general public. Despite these common constructions, Black southerners living are "slightly more likely to claim a southern identity than whites are" (p. 73).

This cross-racial identification with being southern has numerous historical roots, including the Great Migration of Black residents to northern and midwestern cities during the early 20th century, the work of southerners in the Civil Rights movement, and the reclamation of southern identity following the repeal of Jim Crow laws (Ayers, 1996; Thompson & Sloan, 2012). However, this identification as southern across racial lines is marked by "moral geographies" and different connections to place; Ayers (1996) asserts that "Black southerners did not have flags or monuments to connect them with the 'official South,' but they were connected to the region by their own 'sweat and sacrifice' and by places of personal meaning—'certain farms, houses, and streets'" (Thompson & Sloan 2012, p. 73). In our study, we can consider the pride associated with land ownership

and a common history of farming as forming part of an identifying connection to southernness, despite experiences with racism or contested beliefs about the meaning of the Confederate flag, which is a prevalent symbol in Lenoir Mills, in spite of outside perceptions of white supremacy in the community.

Thomas and Sloan further argue that because the United States is a “highly racialized society,” our “economic, political, and social structures are organized by race” (p. 89). Such racialized organization, however, can be ignored by those in racially powerful positions, like southern whites. In their work, as in ours, the invisibility of whiteness – expressed by our participants through a color-blind construction of community and school – “serves to hide the privileges and advantages associated with being white” (p. 90), or in our research, the racially exclusive nature of bonding capital.

These challenging constructions of community and school, supported by exclusive bonding capital, shape the profound challenges school leaders encounter when trying to address educational equity. The school administrators in the study appeared cautious when addressing educational inequity; while participants described efforts to address economic insecurity, they were much less likely to discuss efforts aimed at racial inequities, perhaps not surprising given the color-blind lens through which community insiders viewed schooling. This dominant narrative creates challenges for educational leaders, even for those with ideas for bridging and equity work, wary of their status as community insiders.

From a critical place-based leadership perspective, we see evidence that educational leaders are responsive to the community in some areas (such as food insecurity) but are struggling to find pathways to engage in critical place-based leadership practice related to race. School leaders have uninterrogated beliefs about race and poverty that have the potential to replicate bias evident in the larger community, resulting in educational institutions as sites of social reproduction rather than promoters of equity. The lack of bridging capital contributes to these leadership challenges.

Implications for Research and Practice

Given our sampling strategies – using leaders as gatekeepers – this research highlights the master narrative of Lenoir Mills community and school.

Future research should include robust participation from marginalized social groups in the community. This case study, for example, is missing perspectives from Batesville families, multigenerational land-owning Black families, and Black community leaders. Inclusion of marginalized voices would illuminate community counter-narratives and potentially highlight different bonding and bridging ties. Future research should also consider the inclusion of critical race theories in addition to critical place-based leadership to elevate minoritized voices and counter-narratives, and to surface the relationship between master narratives of white supremacy and educational leadership for equity.

The findings from this study do not offer neat solutions to the challenges rural leaders face when developing equitable, community-centered schools. Rather, we conclude that more research is necessary to ensure practice-centered recommendations will be actionable, considering the role of community leaders for administrative tenure and turnover (Wood et al., 2013). Instead, we ask crucial questions for rural scholars, policymakers, and leadership preparation programs: What are the implications for “grow your own” leadership programs, with the consideration of bonding social capital? How can we better prepare insider educational leaders to serve as catalysts for bridging? How can “outsiders” gain access and inclusion to the community while also navigating master narratives? How can school board members and community leaders be included in development of equity-centered practices? Educational leadership preparation programs can provide multiple opportunities to critically engage with personal views and biases, interrogate beliefs about student learners and communities, and understand the social, historical, and geographic contexts that shape dominant community narratives and educational norms. Currently, leadership programs must draw from non-rural strategies when developing these interventions, as rural educational leadership remains undertheorized and under-researched. Future research should consider the links between research and practice, with a focus on equity and a willingness to interrogate and problematize community narratives. The task for researchers and practitioners is to understand the dominant narratives that contribute to marginalization and create paths forward to disrupt them in order to create more equitable educational experiences for rural youth.

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