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Catharine Biddle

There is a tension between the principles of global education reform, with its focus on fiscal efficiency, literacy and numeracy, and the increasing interest in meeting the needs of the whole child and addressing childhood adversity within schools. In rural communities, this tension may be heightened by fractured social service networks mediated by distance and the declining economic well-being of many communities perpetuated by decades of unfavorable social and economic policy. Drawing on focus group discussions with 110 rural Maine educators, this study examines how rural educators negotiate this tension in their day-to-day practice to address student needs through the lens of critical rural theory. I find that teachers describe resistance at the individual and collective level to pressures they feel are imposed upon them fiscally and politically, leveraging their marginality and drawing on an ethos of care to mitigate symptoms of adversity they identify in their students. However, teachers describe the ways in which this resistance comes at a high personal cost. I discuss how teacher insights may contribute to better designed policy to address both teacher burnout and childhood adversity in rural communities; considerations that are even more critical as schools grapple with the social and organizational challenges brought on by COVID-19.

There is no question that in the past several decades the day-to-day experiences of educators, students and families in the United States have been shaped by the principles of the global education reform movement (Sahlberg, 2016). Coined by Sahlberg (2016), the global education reform movement is characterized by the standardization of education across contexts, a hyperfocus on literacy and numeracy in response to the rise in internationally comparable standardized achievement assessments, increased use of corporate management models and, lastly, the institution of test-based accountability policies. In the United States, there have been many policies that have defined a move towards these principles at the state and federal level, with the 2001 ESEA reauthorization No Child Left Behind being the best known federal incarnation. While the most recent reauthorization of ESEA, the Every Students Succeeds Act, dismantles some of the more punitive aspects of the law, many of the core commitments to the principles of global education reform remain (McGuinn, 2016).

By contrast, whole child development is a paradigm for understanding the work of schools that has gained greater political support more recently (Lewallen et al., 2015). First conceptualized as a public health framework in the 1980s, whole child development advocates for a balanced focus on physical and mental health and safety, active student engagement while at school, access to personalized and caring support by adults, and a curriculum that addresses 21st century skills (Lewallen et al., 2015). These objectives are accomplished through the creation of a healthy developmental ecology for children at the school site through the coordination of physical and mental health services, attending to the physical environment and school employee wellness, and engaging families and communities in meaningful, culturally responsive ways. The movement to shift schools’ understanding of their work in this direction comes in response to the pressure which schools have experienced in the past several decades to focus on achievement as the defining metric of their institutional success (Sahlberg, 2016).

One powerful idea that has shaped an emerging subset of whole child development practices in schools is the concept of adverse childhood experiences and the research which has been conducted on their long-term effects on health and well-being (Felitti et al., 1998; Hair et al., 2015; Johnson et al., 2013; Sacks & Murphy, 2018). Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) refer to a category of stressful experiences that include neglect, physical, emotional or sexual abuse, experiences of or exposure to intimate partner violence, substance use disorder or mental illness in the home, incarceration of a family member or caregiver separation through divorce, death or abandonment (SAMHSA, 2014). While these forms of adversity may occur for anyone in any social group, their long-term effects may be more serious for individuals also experiencing systemic forms of adversity such as poverty or identity-based exclusion or discrimination,
such as racism (Cronholm et al., 2015). When ACEs and systemic adversity co-occur, they can negatively affect children’s access to supports or increase overall stress, which may lead to trauma, long-term negative health outcomes, or even early death at higher rates than other populations (Felitti et al., 1998).

As states grapple with the long-term implications of the disruptions to learning and our social institutions (families, schools, businesses, healthcare) associated with COVID-19, state departments of education all over the country have increased their emphasis on implementing whole child and trauma-informed practices in response to research that suggests that schools may be high leverage environments for healing or mitigating the effects of adversity for children and youth (see Cantor et al., 2018; Chafouleas et al., 2016; Cole et al., 2005; Walkley & Cox, 2013). Trauma-informed practices are meant to enhance feelings of safety within the school environment and prevent retraumatization by providing appropriate supports to young people, creating calmer school environments and creating awareness of the signs and symptoms of trauma related to childhood adversity amongst school-based adults (Chafouleas et al., 2016; Dorado et al., 2016; Elliot et al., 2005; Harris & Fallot, 2001; Musckett, 2014; Wolpow et al., 2009). For many schools, however, there have been few on-going professional resources to support these shifts, leading teachers and school leaders to make sense childhood adversity on their own in the wake of the proliferation of ACEs 101 trainings (Overstreet & Chafouleas, 2016). Furthermore, the institutional priorities that most schools have pursued over the past two decades have been born out of a different educational reform paradigm focused on achievement, literacy, numeracy, and efficiency (Au, 2010; Sahlberg, 2016). As schools scramble to address the developmental effects of COVID on youth (which researchers are still in the process of trying to understand), teacher sense-making around these issues will demand that they make sense of these competing paradigms.

For rural educators and schools, the tension between these two reform paradigms may be particularly acute, given the ways in which the metrocentric principles of global education reform fail to leverage key rural assets (Schafft, 2016). Examples abound: This dynamic has been identified in studies of rural educator practice in the classroom (Azano, 2011, 2015; Barnhardt, 2014; Knapp, 2014), school leader practice in shaping programs and policy (Budge, 2006; Budge, 2010; Hall & McHenry-Sorber, 2017) and in studies of variations in geographic impact of education policy (Casto et al., 2016; Eppley, 2009; 2019; McCabe & Sipple, 2011). At the same time, however, rural communities have experienced many changes within the past two decades that have exacerbated the occurrence of childhood adversity, as evidenced by rising child poverty rates in many rural locales (Schaefer et al., 2016), rates of placement of children in foster or kinship care (Children’s Bureau, 2018) and increased instances of substance use disorder in many rural communities (Meit et al., 2014; Rigg et al., 2018). Despite these changes, there have been few studies of organic educator responses to childhood adversity in rural settings. Furthermore, critical approaches to this topic are rarely undertaken, and treatments of the topic typically begin in the social isolation and perceived deficit of rural communities. Therefore, this study takes a critical approach to answering the following question: How do rural educators negotiate institutional priorities in a context of increasing personal and systemic adversity for rural families and children?

Critical rural theory and rural educator practice

Critical rural theory seeks to decenter urbanization as the assumed trajectory for society to make visible other socio-spatial arrangements and their complexities (Thomas et al., 2011). Following the critical tradition, it recognizes the reach of power relationships that occur across space, rejecting the framework of the rural-urban continuum in favor of attending to core-periphery relationships that position rural hinterland as a site of resource extraction for an urbanized core (Cardoso & Faletto, 1979) or as the site of recreation and consumption for urbanites through the creation of nostalgic rural hyperrealities (i.e. places that look and feel sufficiently rural to the urban tourist’s eye; Urry, 2003). Like other critical theories, it rejects the passivity of individuals and the determinism of structure, suggesting that while space mediates the daily life of individuals, and therefore social interaction and culture, individuals have agency in constituting these practices (Flora et al., 2016; Thomas et al., 2011). Within the context of school and community relationships, critical rural theory draws attention to the ways in which the purpose, activities, and effects of education and schools as institutions may differ across both space and place.

Critical rural theory is useful for this study as it draws attention to implicit assumptions in institutional and policy logics that may be based on certain (often urban) socio-spatial configurations. Previous work on U.S. education policy and its fit with rural educational realities suggests that federal and state imaginaries are often implicitly urban or
suburban contexts with their attendant concentration of resources, population density and political economy (Eppley, 2009; Schafft, 2016). For rural schools, these challenges included small class sizes ill-suited for statistically evaluating academic progress (Goetz, 2005), small central offices unable to compete in federal grant competitions (Howley, 2013), and challenges related to recruiting staff that could meet the “highly qualified” designation in each subject that they needed to teach (Eppley, 2009). Additional harms included the marginalization of transient or homeless students perceived to negatively affect test scores (Schafft et al., 2010) and worries about the impact of new special education students or English language learners in small districts (Bustamante et al., 2010).

Using critical rural theory, it is possible to better parse the lived experiences of educators in rural schools as individuals finding their way in a professional practice of teaching at the nexus of competing structural influences shaped by urbanization and spatial marginality. These structures include professional norms and expectations within schools as institutions (Arum, 2000; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983), the diminished political economy of rural places in educational policy (Schafft, 2016), and the spatial identity of teacher’s themselves and how it mediates their relationship to the community (Schulte, 2016; Walker-Gibbs, 2016). The ability to parse teachers’ navigation of this competition is important in the context of understanding their descriptions of their responses to local adversity. Teachers are often on the front lines of responding to childhood adversity in rural schools with no school counselors, nurses, social workers, or psychologists (Biddle et al., 2018). From a whole child framework, this means that teachers have an outsize influence on the type of school-based supports that students and even families receive in the face of this adversity.

An important caveat of using this theory to explore how rural educators negotiate global education reform within the context of local adversity is to ensure that other manifestations of social power are not minimized or erased by the use of this lens; rather, my intent is to highlight the ways in which these are intersectional with spatial inequality and can help us to better highlight nuanced counter-stories that decenter the urban without reifying rurality (and whatever social meanings are imposed upon it). Race, class, gender, colonization, and immigration status, for example, all play a role in understanding the negotiation of predominantly (although not exclusively) white, largely middle-class and predominantly female educators within these contexts.

**Methods**

**Context of the Study**

This critical, qualitative study draws on focus groups conducted in the fall of 2016 and spring of 2017 in a rural, remote county in Maine. The region in which the work took place is a forested, coastal county whose residents have traditionally relied on fishing, timber, and some agriculture for work. Tourism also plays a small role in the local economy, although the county does not receive the level of tourism that some parts of Maine are known for. The economic well-being of the area has declined in the past two decades, with an increasing number of youth out-migrating to other parts of the state or country and increases in both child and individual poverty rates. The unemployment rate in the county in 2018 stood at 8%, higher than the state average of 5%. Although residents of the county describe it as a beautiful, rugged place to live, access to healthcare within the county is uneven which has raised concerns for residents, particularly around the rising rates of substance use disorder (double those in other parts of the state in 2018) and access to mental health treatment. Residents listed these concerns as the two most important public health issues facing their communities in a county-wide needs assessment in 2015, with concern voiced for the ways in which these issues disproportionately affected low-income individuals and families, individuals without a high school credential, and individuals with mental or physical disabilities. The county is home to a more racially and ethnically diverse population than much of New England, with ancestral land and sovereign nation of the Dawn Waters (pseudonym) tribe located within the borders of the county, as well as a growing Latinx population which was initially attracted to the area to harvest blueberries, with some families choosing to leave the migrant stream to reside in the county over the last two decades.

**Participants and data collection**

Participants for the focus groups were educators and school staff recruited from twelve schools (10 K-6 or K-8 schools and 2 high schools) across five rural, remote districts in this region of Maine. Ten focus groups lasting 60-90 minutes were conducted at nine school sites with teachers, administrators, school support staff, custodians, and bus drivers. In total, 110 school staff participated in the focus groups, with group sizes ranging from four to fourteen. Each of the focus groups was co-facilitated by a member of the research team, which included graduate students and faculty (all outsiders to the region), and a
member of the community organization with whom we partnered to complete this work (all insiders to the region). Questions were asked about teacher-student relationships, the relationship between the school and the community, as well as strengths and challenges related to supporting student learning and healthy development, broadly conceived. These focus groups were convened for two purposes: The first was to serve as listening sessions for the design of a program intended to support addressing community concerns about child well-being in the region more broadly; the second was to understand educators’ everyday experiences of addressing childhood adversity within the context of rural schools as they are currently resourced in Maine.

**Data analysis**

To analyze the data, a grounded theory coding procedure was used in conjunction with a critical lens (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Merriam, 1998). The transcriptions were open-coded focusing on participant perceptions of what resources and actions were necessary in order to meet student and family needs holistically either in the present or in an imagined future. Because of the critical lens of the study, in vivo coding was used in conjunction with attention to systemic inequality in shaping the institutional experiences of students, families and teachers. For example, participant mentions of formerly available resources like social workers or mental health providers being discontinued due to budget cuts were coded as “fiscal efficiency.” This process produced 134 initial codes, that ranged from “giving hugs” to “no training in addressing adverse childhood experiences” to “happiness as an educational indicator.” Constant-comparison was used to iteratively reduce codes to themes and categories relevant to rural school staff perceptions of school-community relationships and student learning (Saldaña, 2015). Axial coding was used to aggregate codes in relationship to one another. This process led to the development of several broad groups of codes: “Lived experience of academic-focused, high-stakes policy,” “Identification of needed resources,” “Descriptions of resistance,” “Imaginaries,” “Beliefs about community,” and “Underleveraged assets.” The transcripts were then revisited for a round of selective coding, with particular attention to contradictory or disconfirming evidence. Finally, member-checking was conducted with community partners, including both former and current employees of schools in the districts in which the focus groups were conducted (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Merriam, 1998).

**Positionality Statement**

My own history of adversity and privilege in childhood is one that I have reflected on extensively as a result of this project. I grew up in a wealthy, predominantly white suburb with a physically and emotionally abusive father who went on, after my mother divorced him, to commit murder-suicide, leaving my brothers and myself orphaned. The incident was extensively covered by the media and so, for a time, there was nowhere I could go where people did not know “what happened” to me (unusual for many trauma survivors). My younger brothers and I were put into kinship care with my maternal grandparents, who struggled to understand our needs in the wake of these serial tragedies but did the best that they could and ensured that we received mental health support and other interventions. I attended a private school, and because of the very public nature of the adversity that I suffered, my teachers went out of their way to make sure my needs were met, at one point, changing the curriculum so that, instead of watching *The Shining* for a unit on horror as was traditionally done, our class watched the much less graphic and more suspense-oriented film *Rope*. However, others from my class with less public traumas have written about the ways in which their own needs were not met by these very same teachers (See Knoll, 2017; Roberts, 2019).

My reflections on the intersection of my adverse childhood experiences with other aspects of my positionality (class, race, and geography in particular) have led me to articulate several of my core beliefs about both childhood adversity and the role of schools in healing. First, I reject the idea that childhood adversity is the result of the deficits of any particular groups of people or places—we know enough about the prevalence of ACEs to understand that they occur everywhere and can happen to anyone. However, structural inequality—particularly racial, economic, and spatial inequality—have real effects on who is able to create, access and benefit from the tools we often rely on for healing. Because I grew up white in a densely populated suburb where services were available and my family had money to access them, I received culturally appropriate supports. Because I attended a private school, my teachers did not feel hamstrung by stringent accountability requirements and were able to rearrange my assignments and the curriculum to demonstrate care and flexibility.

In addition to my personal experiences with trauma and reflections on how my identities related to the supports I received, I have also reflected extensively on my rural and urban teaching experiences and my own role in potentially leaving
my students with trauma from a "no excuses" era of schooling. The creation of a healing environment for young people at school or in other youth-serving settings requires intention, even without specialized knowledge of ACEs in particular. It was easy, in a no-excuses context, to perpetuate harm in the name of rigor and to believe that we were doing students good by telling them to just “be resilient” instead of a) buffering the barriers to healing that we had control over; and b) demonstrating culturally appropriate ways of caring. It is in part because of reflecting on the possible harm that I and others in my teaching cohort perpetuated that I became so interested in understanding the organic ways in which rural teachers attend to the whole child in the paradigm of global reform, and how they resist the dictates of the paradigm to still find ways to support the conditions for healing and learning.

Findings

I first trace teachers’ description of their lived experiences of the ways in which global education reform in Maine structures their everyday experiences. I use these descriptions to then contextualize their descriptions of their own resistance or compliance with these reforms, including the ways in which they themselves or their administrators buffered consequences for resistance or insisted upon compliance. Finally, I discuss the ways teachers spoke about alternative visions of schooling that would allow for acknowledgement of their own and their students’ whole selves.

The effects of global reform on rural teacher practice

Rising intensity of academic expectations.
Teachers described the combination of an emphasis on increasing student achievement and the dwindling fiscal resources within their districts as an impossible problem of practice in the context of the changing needs of their students. Elementary-level teachers emphasized the changes in expectations by describing the compression of those expectations at earlier grades:

Teacher 1: We’re pushing our kids so hard earlier, and earlier, and earlier. I mean, kindergarten you used to learn your colors and your numbers and now you want to read in kindergarten. I just, personally, feel that we’re expecting so much out of our kids at an earlier age, all the time. When we're taking away some of that fun from school, and some of that, just being a kid. I think we're pushing them too hard, too fast.

Teacher 2: Yeah, I agree. Like, you hit fourth grade in elementary school now and the expectations are like they were when we were in sixth grade.

Teacher 1: Mm-hmm (affirmative).
Teacher 2: We were in kindergarten together, we had a sandbox... We played, it was a big sandbox. In our kindergarten room, we wouldn't have time. There’s no way we’d have time for something like that.

Increased expectations for student performance, teachers lamented, were not met with a corresponding increase in resources, although cuts to art, music, drama, library time and other “electives” were noted as ways in which some resources had been freed for increased focus on subjects that were measured by state tests, such as English Language Arts and math.

Not enough resources for non-academic needs. Teachers noted that, along with rising expectations and the intensification of state focus on data from particular subjects as a measure of quality, little attention has been given to what they perceived as changing student needs, particularly around stress and mental health. Teachers saw many ways in which stress directly interfered with their ability to address the curriculum, including rising student anxiety related to economic insecurity, such as hunger or transiency, or personal adversity such as parent death (often from substance use), removal from the home and placement with temporary caregivers or other family members. Expressing a sentiment heard in all of the focus groups, one teacher told us:

I feel helpless in the sense of not having enough resources, not having people who can come and support us and help us. These kids are keeping it so locked in, and I do see the stress. We have more children suffering from anxiety than I’ve ever seen before. And it’s a legitimate anxiety because they are worried. And they cannot focus on schoolwork, as well, because they get overwhelmed. It’s a major, major concern for me.

In all of the focus groups, teachers felt the mismatch between instructional time, teacher training, and student needs in a context of rising expectations created an impossible situation in which to professionally succeed. One teacher analogized raising student achievement in their school to trying to fix a car without a motor:

We are busting our ass with ELA and math, and taking every resource we can, but our ELA and our math are not going to increase. We’re almost trying to fix the—You say to a mechanic, “Have the whole car fixed except for the motor in the middle.” We can't. It has to be the whole child,
and we can’t, with the resources we have, treat
the whole child.
The emphasis of teachers on their own “inability”,
feeling “overwhelmed”, regularly doing things
“outside their job” or training, having “no time” and
not knowing how to address the issues on their own
was mentioned 27 times across all of the focus
groups.

The worry of doing harm. In the context of the
rising intensity of expectations and the lack of
resources and training to scaffold children’s learning
given the magnitude of their needs, teachers
described a constant ethical dilemma: wanting to do
what they perceived as best for students while also
doing no harm. Teachers frequently worried that, in
the absence of training, they were actually harming
children through their lack of knowledge about
childhood adversity. One teacher summed up the
challenge pithily, stating:

There’s a layer between teaching and learning—
that social-emotional . . . . You know what I
mean? That whole mental health piece, if you
will, that we don’t know how to get. One, we
don’t know how. Two, we don’t have time to
learn how. Three, it’s just one more thing I’m
saying, “Okay. I have to look at this, or think
about this,” or whatever, and you’ve got 20 of
those.

Some teachers described the disconnect between
resources available to meet students’ mental and
physical needs and the very public emphasis on
raising student achievement as a deidentification with
an increasingly dehumanized professional identity.

As one teacher put it:

As a teacher, I’m pulled here because we’re going
to see our grade in the paper. As a grandmother,
I’m pulled here because I know their belly needs
to be fed, and they need to have a place quiet to
do homework. They might need a warm jacket. I
don’t know everyone probably feels the same
way, but that’s how I feel.

The intensity of the focus on achievement was not
perceived by teachers as an opportunity to do their
work with greater clarity and focus, but rather as a
harm to the children whom they served through fewer
opportunities to express themselves in a variety of
ways (such as art, drama, music, etc.), and to forge
relationships with adults trained in a broad range of
orientations for interacting with youth (such as social
workers, school counselors, or clinicians). Teachers
felt they were left with only their existing training and
a mandate to accelerate student achievement in
their classrooms.

Teachers hinted or openly talked about the ways
in which they resisted the kinds of efficiencies and
foci that they felt were being put upon them in the
push for literacy and numeracy and achievement
measurable on state tests. Some of this resistance was
known amongst the staff and talked about openly in
the focus groups (classified here as “collective”
resistance), while other forms of individual resistance
were revealed in the focus group setting (classified as
individual efforts).

Individual Efforts to Resist in Their Everyday
Practice

Teachers described acts at the individual level
that they did not coordinate with the school or many
others that they saw as contravening the normative
expectations for what they should prioritize in their
professional work with students. These acts,
particularly the individual efforts, were sometimes
described with a sense of furtive civil disobedience,
often accompanied by giggles or embarrassment as
they admitted them to their colleagues during the
focus group sessions. One of the outcomes of the
focus groups was the discovery or collective
recognition that these individual acts were, in fact,
resistant and in some cases were widespread amongst
teachers. Some of these actions included small
gestures, such as hugging students in contravention
with policy avoiding such engagement. However,
some of these actions were significant forms of
resistance, such as refusing to engage with mandated
reporting systems or issues around documentation by
choosing to not ask specific kinds of questions to
students and caregivers.

Inclusive language for caregivers. Teachers
and staff talked about ensuring that they used
language that reflected the broad range of living
situations that their students were in, including
kinship and foster care. “Maine, in the nation, has the
highest rate of kids living with grandparents of any
state in the nation, per capita,” one teacher told us.
“You can’t say “Mom or Dad” anymore, because one
third of your student population doesn’t live with
Mom or Dad,” another explained. Teachers were very
aware of the challenges that kinship care, in
particular, raised for the caregivers with whom they
interacted. “That’s a place I feel we could have more
support,” one teacher told us, “for grandparents in
this area bringing up grandchildren, great-grand
children.”

For some of the teachers, being inclusive in their
language was a reflection of a culture in which
intergenerational closure was an important point of
pride. In one of the focus groups, teachers discussed
the ways in which the presence of extended family
created more safety for young people in the town.
Teacher 1: Many have extended family. Not all, but many and many have extended family within this very town.
Interviewer: That is a benefit, you’re saying?
Teacher 1: Oh, totally a benefit.
Interviewer: In the sense?
Teacher 1: They have other generations helping to make sure they’re getting what they need. We have grandparents that pick them up. Uncles that pick them up. They get dropped off at a grandparents’ house or…
Teacher 2: I think there’s a feeling of safety in our small community. Everybody knows everybody and—
Teacher 1: People look out for each other’s kids.
Teacher 2: —Yeah.

For some teachers, using inclusive language for caregiving signaled respect for the tight-knit social networks of the community, as well as ensuring students and their families felt acknowledged by the school. These practices, however, were not owned by the school in any organized sense; they were born from teachers’ own efforts to build relationships with students and their families.

**Keeping food and clothing in their classrooms.** In six of the nine focus groups, teachers discussed keeping supplies to meet students’ basic needs in their classrooms, including clean clothing, snacks, toiletries and other necessities. Sometimes these were solitary activities that teachers undertook themselves, and sometimes these were small group efforts to meet the needs of individual students. An upper grade teacher explained to us:

I teach seventh and eighth grades and they’re junior high kids, but we have a lot of hunger. We’ve implemented having snacks and what not because if you’re hungry, you don’t work because you are too hungry to work. Actually, I have a snack station in my room for kids and they’ll just come and get a couple scoops of dry cereal. It’s just enough to keep working. We have kids who they come with a lot on their plate and some days, they’re just not ready to learn.

Another teacher told us that she goes to yard sales or takes stuff from her house, throws it in a bag, and brings it to class so the kids can “paw through it.” “Something needs to be sewn all the time,” another teacher told us of how she helps students. There was a normalcy to the ways in which teachers talked about their efforts to meet student needs within their classrooms.

Teachers talked about providing food, clothing, and other necessities to students through their personal efforts as both leaning into their own humanity and as a survival strategy. As one teacher put it,

> We’ve talked many times in conversations here of we have many kids here who are very literally at the bottom of Maslow’s hierarchy of—really, it’s just a matter of “I need food. I need shelter.” We have kids here who I just put on email today, we have one girl who doesn’t have winter boots… Kids who can’t play sports because their parents can’t afford gas. We have a family here, and I’ve heard the brother say, “Well, I’m really kinda hungry,” and they come to school and they sit at the edge of the bleachers every single morning because their fridge is almost always empty…I know in [town name], I know many people who don’t have running water and not by choice.

The theory of Maslow’s (1943) hierarchy of needs resonated with many teachers who felt that if the expectation was to support student learning then they had a personal responsibility to see that students had their basic needs met. Teachers justified these practices by pointing out the ways in which students whose basic needs are not met were distracted from learning by hunger, embarrassed about their appearance, or displayed other feelings of inadequacy. For these teachers, not meeting these needs through their personal efforts was not an option, as without it they did not feel they could support student learning. As one teacher told us,

> We’re so busy meeting their basic needs that we can’t—I’ve been in education for 15 years… Now, we’re too busy meeting these basic needs that we can’t expose the kids to different things. We just have to meet those basic needs and that’s exhausting in itself as a teacher, when you really have to focus on teaching reading and math and those things. That’s really important, too.

The exhaustion mentioned by this teacher featured prominently across the focus groups as well, as teachers discussed the level of energy that meeting student needs on an individual basis required.

**Giving hugs.** At three of the nine schools, faculty discussed the practice of hugging children, despite being told this was not allowed, as a method of meeting their immediate needs. At one of the schools, teachers who were also parents at the school discussed their views about “hands-off” policies, saying:

> Teacher 1: I’m thankful that, I mean, I know now a days, it’s supposed to be a hands-off policy, you’re not supposed to hug students but, in this school, the teachers still—if a kid needs a hug—

> Teacher 2: They get a hug—
The two teachers discussing the act of hugging a child acknowledge that meeting what they perceive as a need of the children in their class for physical affection contravenes the policies at their school around physically touching students. While such policies are not explicitly part of the global reform movement, here the teachers group the prohibition of their meeting this need in the same category as other political barriers that direct their attention and keep them from meeting students’ perceived needs. Another teacher at a different school explained this in another focus group:

**Teacher:** We still hug our kids anytime, anywhere. I mean, a real hug. We were taught the side hug, but that’s all that happened. We were taught it, but it went, you know...

**Interviewer:** So, when you have kids come in the door and you know they’ve had a hard day, what strategies are you using with your kids right now to help them?

**Teacher:** Well, there’s the hug immediately, that you can usually tell. Some seek out the people they feel safe and can trust...

**Teacher 2:** I will just say too with us having help in our rooms, an Ed Tech or whatever, it may be that the Ed Tech has a better rapport with our kids than we do, but we all know by looking at our kids when they come through the door it’s already not a good day. That’s normally when we’ll seek out the one that we know that kid will go to or if we’re that person. You know, “I’m going to go check on so-and-so, just to see how they’re doing and they don’t look like they’re coming in in a good spot right now. We have that opportunity to say, “Can you just take the class for a second? Let’s make sure this child is okay or if they need to talk.”

**Negotiating mandated reporting and issues with documentation.** In some cases, strategies that teachers described for pursuing what was best for kids walked a careful line around their legal responsibilities. Because of their professional position, teachers in Maine, like in all states, are mandated reporters for suspected abuse or neglect. In Maine, this requires teachers to call the Maine Office of Child and Family Services if they suspect that a child may be experiencing abuse or neglect in order to prevent long term harm to that child. Teachers, however, felt that the mandated reporting system often perpetuated more harm to local families than help. In one group, a teacher explained this, saying, That [phone call] in my experience, has made situations far worse than simply bringing parents in and educating them to what’s going on. It’s rather ripped families apart, causing hatred and a disconnect between school, which you’re trying to embrace the family and school system.

Other teachers elaborated on this theme in a group conversation, lamenting the lack of control once the phone call is made. In one of the focus groups, the following conversation about mandated reporting ensued:

**Teacher 1:** There’s no control,

**Teacher 2:** You call. They take your information, and then you’re done. You might hear stories about the families and of course in communities that are this small, they try to point fingers of who called, and “Why did you get in my business” and “What did you do?”

**Teacher 3:** Once you make that call, that’s it. You’re no longer involved in the process. They’re not like, let’s sit down and talk about this. You are no longer involved. That’s why there’s a disconnect.

**Teacher 4:** It can make you feel unsafe.

**Teacher 1:** Oh, very much so.

**Teacher 3:** Even if you didn’t make the call, you might be pegged anyway. You know what I mean?

**Teacher 1:** When you care so much about families and your children, as an educator and as a human being, and to have that happen, it’s like, you’re less inclined. That’s why when teachers tell me things, I’m like “Well,” you know, “you have to make that weight.” I’d rather just sit down with [school counselor] and talk to a parent and bring the family in, versus making that phone call.

In another focus group, some teachers talked about being very careful about how they talked with children about situations at home, with the implied meaning that they were trying to skirt the line between getting enough information to respond and not wanting to elicit enough information to feel obligated to report.

Interestingly, white and American Indian faculty in schools serving the Dawn Waters community felt less conflicted about mandated reporting. “Sometimes things go great, sometimes things don’t go great,” one white teacher told us, “I never go home with a guilty conscience when I have to make a report I always need to know that I am doing what’s in the best interest of the child.” An American Indian faculty member said that they trusted the child welfare office, which is located in the community at
the tribal office, to “to keep it anonymous.” “They’re right here,” she said, as another teacher chimed in, “Sometimes they are here immediately if we need them immediately.” However, in schools with a sizeable migrant population related to the County’s agricultural base, teachers and administrators discussed additional concerns with differently documented students and not necessarily knowing their legal obligations in those situations. In one focus group, the following conversation ensued between an administrator and a teacher.

Administrator: We don’t ask for proof of citizenship. I know some schools do.
Teacher: We don’t?
Administrator: Well, no, we don’t.
Teacher: I’m glad.

Collective resistance at the school level

In some of the focus groups, faculty identified ways in which their schools or districts had specifically chosen to push back against the normative expectations to prioritize achievement in a context of fiscal efficiency. These instances of collective action bear similarity to collective organizing in that the coordination of these efforts required cooperative resistance across the faculty. The most prevalent way that staff identified that they felt schools were serving children holistically was through their “family”-like school culture. In six out of the ten focus groups, teachers talked about their faculties as “working together” and having “love” for one another. “Every one of us cover for every one of us whenever we need it,” a teacher told us at one school. For some staff, this collective work was consciously linked to preventing stress and allowing for emotional health. As one teacher put it,

We have a real friendship piece, with us adults. Help each other, we’re friends outside of school too. We have each other. Somebody’s got to go to the bathroom and there’s nobody there, there’s somebody that’s walking by, you can nab them. We all watch each others’ back. And that’s the emotional piece that helps you get through some of the hard days.

In another school, a teacher described the ways in which complementary strengths across the faculty allowed for multi-faceted supports, saying, “It’s a very good staff. I believe. It’s a good blend of who offsets … What might be your downfall somebody else can pick that up easily.” Some staff identified the importance of school leadership in fostering this sense of the collective.

Teacher 1: We look at kids as individuals and we don’t just look at behavior, we look at the reasons for behavior and we try to understand why kids are acting the way they act, not just responding to their behavior I would say.

Teacher 2: We all discuss it, we all try to work together.

Teacher 1: We really work together as a team.

That’s been a hallmark of this school under [Principal name’s] leadership.

In a few schools, this cooperation was also leveraged towards mobilizing to meet students’ material needs. “We talk to each other,” one group told us, “Find out who needs shoes, who needs a sweater.” At another school, the following discussion ensued about the staff’s cooperative behavior:

It’s been amazing to have a staff that wants to put whatever the kids need first. The question isn’t can we do it, it’s how are we going to do it?... We can see there’s a strong need, and some of us can relate and some of us can’t to whatever that need is, but the question is, how do I help? Not, this kid, it’s their fault, or putting the blame. The question is trying to figure out … There’s something broken here. I want to help fix it.

Taken together, whether faculty efforts to address students’ basic needs and create welcoming environments seemed to be a function of faculty’s efforts to make explicit their efforts and the support of their school leadership in helping to coordinate and support their efforts. On balance, however, teacher’s reactions to each other’s revelations in their focus groups suggested that the majority of this work is taking place in individual classrooms through teachers’ individual efforts.

Rural educator imaginaries for educating children holistically

Teachers were asked in each focus group to describe supports that might better help them to meet the needs of their students in ways that they felt were appropriate. The question was posed as “What they would wish for if they could wave a magic wand” in order to free them from the confines of what was logistically feasible to what a vision of “wild success” might be in a rural educational system.

While teachers generally answered with suggestions for piecemeal supports, their responses clustered around three key themes: adequate resources to achieve the high expectations laid out by the state; a broad base of community supports for families; and finally, a model of teaching and learning that recognizes humanity.

Adequate human resources to achieve high expectations laid out by the state. Teachers in every focus group expressed the need for more resources for their rural schools to adequately address the
changing needs of their students. One way in which teachers tentatively expressed views resistant to the organizing principles of global school reform was their questioning of the principles of economies of scale as applied to rural schools, particularly with regard to the number of support staff rural students deserve. Having only part time support staff or sharing a school counselor with other elementary schools was very challenging. As one educator told us.

The whole question about the counselor is really tough in a school this size. It’s too small to have somebody here all the time. Of course, our kids never have a meltdown in the three hours that the counselor is here.

In the same vein, an administrative assistant at one of the schools talked about how not having a school nurse affected her work, saying,

Admin Asst: Even the physical health, we have [school nurse name] who is here once a month—

Teacher: —Once a month—

Admin Asst: —We could use her everyday!

Teacher: And *you* [indicated administrative assistant] become the nurse whenever she’s not here.

Admin Asst: Yeah, I become the nurse and I definitely didn’t go to school to be a nurse. That’s another piece we don’t have… If we have a child in crisis, what do they do? If I’m dealing with a parent, and I have child in crisis, they are looking for me to say, “Well, what do I do?” I’m like, “I don’t know!” It would be nice to have someone that they can bring into the conversation with the teacher and say, “Well, you need to contact…” I don’t know all the, [Department of Health and Human Services] or whoever counseling. A lot of parents cannot do that on their own.

Especially a lot of parents and grandparents.

At another school, a teacher said in frustration, “She doesn’t have time to do it all. We’re all yelling [name]!, [name]!, [name]!” referring to the administrative assistant. Others described the ways in which the administrative assistant became an ad hoc social worker for families.

In focus groups, teachers questioned these sharing arrangements and the absence of specialized staff, although the questioning was expressed tentatively. A typical example might be a statement such as when one teacher said, “If we had a school nurse even (pause) … one day a week” or another that asked for “an extra resource person” to work in the school every day, then trailed off. Teachers said their work would be improved in they had just five minutes to talk to the school counselor when she was in the building about challenging situations they were facing. Many times, these requests were hedged with “I know we’re a small school, but…” or “We used to have this years ago, but now…” The tentativeness with which these challenges occurred seem to signal the depth of the ways in which neoliberal education policies, particularly economies of scale, have been internalized by the staff.

A broad base of community supports in order to “fix” families. Teacher beliefs about the personal responsibility of families—particularly parents—for childhood adversity were as diverse as the sources of adversity students faced. Teachers expressed varied beliefs about the causes and consequences of poverty, substance use disorder, mental illness, and abuse or neglect and the role that parents played as agents in their children’s distress. While teachers universally expressed hope that their schools could better support parents, there was a schism in their beliefs about why parents needed these supports.

In some of the focus groups, teachers shared anecdotes designed to illustrate parents acting in clueless or uncaring ways, attributing these directly to both poverty and lack of education. One teacher, in detailing hoped for supports, told the following story:

I have parents that, because they’re fourth generational poverty, they don’t have some of the skills they need to meet the needs of the students. Will there be a piece to reach out to them, help them, or who to go to to help them? To give an example. I had a kid miss 25 days out of the first 40. Absents, tardies. I called mom in, sat her down. “Why is she missing?” “Well, we can’t get all four kids ready in the morning.”

“Why don’t you do it the night before?” “I didn’t think of it.”

The implication of this story was that the parent lacked the ability to plan or think ahead because of their own innate deficiencies. Similarly, some teachers cast parents as the source of children’s adversity. “Some of these kids,” a teacher told us, “they look shell-shocked when they come into school.” As a result, some teachers focused their suggestions on ways to “fix” parents through parenting classes or counseling. One teacher told us,

What I would love to see if the whole family unit taken care of, not just a child. It’s not going to help to fix just the child and then go right back into the same environment. That whole unit needs to be taken care of. That’s a hard job to tackle, but it’s what’s necessary to have that child nurtured and mature into a health adult if the family unit is fixed. The whole family counseled.
Despite this diversity of beliefs, teachers in every focus group discussed the ways in which stronger community supports for families would be as powerful as any school-based curricular intervention. Suggested supports ranged from mental health access to substance use disorder treatment in the region, to transportation, to parenting classes. Teachers emphasized the importance of not just providing more services, but also providing gas money to parents in order to access the services. “Transportation” was a repeated refrain when asked what barriers families face to accessing services.

A model of teaching and learning that recognizes culture and place. While many teachers expressed a desire to support students in meeting state expectations, some teachers went beyond a desire to serve students holistically as a means to meeting these expectations to questioning whether the current system of measuring student success really measured what was important to students’ lives. Happiness, for example, was held up in two groups as a possible alternative measure that might better capture what was important for student learning and youth development. One teacher suggested:

This is a happy school. This is a happy school, but that doesn’t get registered on anything. I had a little girl tell me, “I cannot wait to come to school tomorrow.” And I’m like “Okay, is there something special…” You know…She’s like, “No I just can’t wait to come back to school tomorrow.” How awesome is that?

In this teacher’s view, the school climate which created a draw to school for some students was not rewarded within the context of the current system. This fit with an overall theme of teachers pointing out the limited ways in which their professional and collective work was understood. Another teacher pointed out the ways in which state tests did not appreciate the differences in student strengths, saying,

Teacher 1: If there’s a kid that learns a different way, why not do that? We all have kids who are like, “Man you’re really great at art.” Why can’t they answer a test on a piece of paper—

Teacher 2: With a drawing.

Teacher 1: —with a drawing! . . . I just think that we need to re-adjust how we think and start looking at things differently instead of a cookie cutter system that worked in 1984, you know?

Teachers felt that being able to understand student experience from multiple dimensions, rather than primarily through achievement, was an important part of cultivating a model of teaching and learning that supported the whole child.

Another dimension of broadening the opportunities to support the whole child was finding more opportunities for place-based and culturally relevant expertise to be brought into the school and classroom. In the school serving the Dawn Waters community, in particular, some teachers lamented the double bind in which there were no full-time art or music jobs at the school, and the fact that tribal members with cultural expertise in traditional dancing or singing could not be hired into part-time positions as music or art teachers at the school because they were not “highly qualified” or even certified. In the focus group, a teacher tried to imagine a way around these barriers:

Teacher 1: That’s the biggest drawback is getting talented people to come to your school. And they’re not going to get a full-time art job, they’re not going to get a full time music job, . . . [and] they have to be certified, they have to be a certified music teacher.

Teacher 2: But could it be the same money that was set aside for a music teacher, could you say like an Ed Tech, and maybe have somebody like [name of tribal member] teach music as in drumming and singing and dancing and do that like during the regular school day? Just trying to think outside the box.

In schools with predominantly white students and faculty, teachers were more likely to mention a connection to the outdoors as an underleveraged asset that might be utilized to support student development. In five out of the ten focus groups, this possibility was mentioned. “I don’t think kids play outside as much as they used to,” one teacher told us, “We have outdoor resources which is, I think, important. It gives you a different perspective when you grow up than living in the cities.” Another teacher told us, “I think many of the kids are tuned into their environment. They’re raised outdoors, hunting, fishing. Those activities are important.”

Discussion

Rural teachers are not the only teachers acting as social service providers on the front lines in a deeply divided and increasingly inequitable America. During the initial nation-wide school closure associated with COVID-19, every school played a critical role in providing food and other essentials to families across the country (Biddle & Frankland, 2021). Prior to COVID-19, educators in schools in all spatial contexts have been increasingly responsible for addressing children’s physical and mental health
needs in classrooms which have spent almost two decades subject to distant decision-makers fiscal and political focus on raising student achievement. However, as part of the “affective” turn towards social-emotional learning and community schools that we’ve seen in the last decade (Zembylas, 2020), state policy is beginning to position whole child education as a means to raising student achievement, rather than a goal in and of itself. This study demonstrates that in rural teacher imaginaries of what schools could look like, absent many of these policy imperatives, rural educators tend to articulate visions that value student well-being for its own sake.

In this study, rural educators articulate several key tensions to addressing childhood adversity within the context of their work. First, educators talked about the rising intensity of academic expectations, the lack of resources to support these expectations in the context of their students’ lived realities and known adversity, and finally, their constant worry that their lack of training and resources to meet student needs will end up doing more harm to their students than good. Contained within these reflections are challenges for rural education that are at once technical and political. While training on recognizing symptoms of trauma can certainly increase educator literacy in decoding situations in which experiences of adversity may be impacting children’s learning, broader systems change is needed to allow pedagogical space to address these needs, combined with actual fiscal and human resources to support that change. In the absence of broader recognition of these issues from policy-makers, the redistribution of resources necessary to achieve that space will require political action from rural communities, including coalition building across racial and class divisions (Shevrin-Venet, 2021). The influx of funds associated with COVID-19 mitigation will not help rural districts troubleshoot these human resource issues in the long-term.

However, a second troubling issue raised by these findings is the degree to which the spatial inequality which governs school funding has been internalized by rural educators who participated in this study. Many of the educators in the study could not imagine a reality—even when given the freedom to do so—in which they and their students were entitled to the support and services of a nurse or mental health counselor more than one or two days a week. This suggests the degree to which the logic of fiscal efficiency has conditioned (and possibly eroded) rural educator beliefs about what rural children are entitled to in terms of support. This finding suggests two possible dangers: First, that these internalized beliefs may stifle political action by rural educators to advocate for a more equitable system (Giroux, Freire, & McClaren, 1988); and second, that system-changing innovation led by rural educators to address these challenges may be suppressed by the conditions of inequity that have governed their professional experiences over the last two decades of decreasing school budgets.

This study also has important implications regarding teacher resilience and burnout. One of the challenges of positioning whole child well-being as a means to raising student achievement, rather than seeing school success as a component of well-being, is that it may contribute to an adversarial relationship between the home and the school. Parents who are found to be depressing their child’s well-being become the villains in a narrative in which teachers are doing and giving everything they can to help children achieve. This narrative encourages a focus on the individual pathology, rather than the systemic structures, such as political and historical exclusions that promote and maintain inequality by restricting access to needed resources. Family dysfunction becomes another source of inequality that teachers must now overcome, as opposed to being seen as a symptom of inequitable spatial access to physical and mental health services, substance use treatment options, and robust economic opportunity.

One limitation of this study is that while it captures the practices of resistance and the imaginaries of a particular region’s teachers in a particular state, it is merely one rural context of the many, diverse rural contexts that exist in the United States. These findings, therefore, may not reflect the practices of resistance and the imagination of other rural educators. However, in doing so, it fills a need for rural research focused on this state, as New England and particularly Maine has been identified as a “rural research desert” by Thier and colleagues (2020). More research with a broader, multi-state sample is needed to understand the extent to which these practices reflect the specific conditions within Maine.

**Conclusion**

While other studies have also captured the lived effects of global education reform for teachers and school leaders (Budge, 2006; Budge, 2010; Schafft et al., 2010; Waller & Barrentine, 2015; Wieczorek & Manard, 2018), an important contribution of this study is the ways in which it captures rural teacher agency in responding to these challenges, and the human cost at which that agency comes. Efforts to implement trauma-informed systems change in rural schools or provide training on addressing adverse childhood experiences will need to engage directly with teachers’ individual and collective home-grown
solutions to meeting their students’ needs if they hope to shift how teachers enact their own ethic of care (Noddings, 1986). Ideally, these systems would amplify what teachers have already created that works well, rather than creating solutions that are out of relationship with the ethic of care as practiced currently by rural educators. Although the findings from this study do not generalize beyond the teachers and schools that participated, the principle of engaging existing teacher efforts to enact care towards students in designing locally, place-relevant responses to adverse childhood experiences in schools is indicated.

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Author:

Catharine Biddle is an Associate Professor of Educational Leadership at the University of Maine. Contact: catharine.biddle@maine.edu

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