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# AUSTRALIAN AND INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF RURAL EDUCATION

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## Reimagining Mobility in Rural Education: Challenges, Opportunities, and Paths Forward

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### Abstract

This special issue explores the complex intersections of mobility and rurality across diverse global contexts. The contributing articles by up-and-coming rural scholars reveal how mobility encompasses multifaceted social, emotional, and cognitive transitions which shape rural individuals' lived experiences and imagined futures. Collectively, this issue calls for more nuanced understandings of mobility in rural education research and policy by recognising it as intertwined with place-based assets, personal needs, and contextualised meanings. This special issue aims to foster innovative strategies promoting educational equity and sustainable development that honour the diverse contexts shaping rural lives and mobilities. Through the platforming of emerging scholars' voices across methodologies and geographies, new strategies promoting sustainable rural education are envisioned.

**Keywords:** *youth mobilities, rural youth, rural community, rural education, mobility, immobility*

### Introduction

Mobility is often thought of as movement between places, jobs, or life stages. Yet mobility is not just about physical movement; it is a vital characteristic inherent to human activities, facilitating transitions between places and enabling social, cultural, political, and economic exchanges (Gasparovic & Prieto-Flores, 2021). In the context of education, mobility is frequently linked with 'leaving'—leaving home, leaving rural places, or leaving behind the past. However, such binary framings, like staying or leaving, rural or urban, stagnant or progressive, seldom capture the complexity and diversity of mobility (Schewel, 2020) and rural lives (Silva et al., 2021) today. As this special issue demonstrates, mobility also encompasses social, emotional, and cognitive transitions that shape how rural individuals seek meaning and imagine their futures.

With this special issue, we aim to foster a vibrant discourse on mobility in rural places, highlighting the criticality of context. It responds to ongoing calls for international and interdisciplinary engagement concerning rural mobility. Our contributing authors, most of whom are emerging scholars, take up this task across geographic, methodological, and conceptual boundaries. By bringing together diverse perspectives and platforming the voices of up-and-coming rural academics, we hope to contribute to the development of innovative strategies that promote educational equity and sustainability in rural areas.

## Mobility Bias in Rural Research

This special issue aims to challenge what Schewel (2020) terms a ‘mobility bias’, that is, the tendency to treat movement as progress and link staying put with constraints and incapacity. This bias is particularly visible in research on rural education and migration, where leaving is often portrayed as a sign of aspiration and opportunity, while remaining is associated with stagnation or lack of ambition. As a result, the complex motivations and meanings attached to staying and moving in rural contexts are frequently overlooked. Mobility is neither universally valued nor equally attainable. Its meaning and value shift across social and spatial contexts, and people’s capacities to pursue or avoid it are unevenly distributed along lines of social stratification (Massey, 2013).

The problematic nature of this binary framing of mobility and immobility becomes particularly evident in discussions of rural–urban mobility across different parts of the world. In more developed countries, rural life is often associated with idleness or a place of retreat (Hillyard, 2007), while in developing contexts it is frequently presented to be deficient and a problem to be solved (Huijsmans, 2024; Zhong, 2024). These imaginaries of rural life shape how mobility is valued in different contexts.

Schewel (2020) offers a useful framework for addressing this bias by distinguishing between two forms of immobility: one is driven by structural constraints that limit individuals’ ability to move, while the other is based on preference or desire to stay. She defines immobility as “*continuity in one’s centre of gravity, or place of residence, relative to spatial and temporal frames*” (p. 329). This framework stresses that immobility, like mobility, is never absolute, but dependent on the social, spatial, and temporal contexts in which it is embedded. Therefore, choosing to remain close to one’s family or community may not reflect passivity but can be seen instead as an active expression of agency and belonging (Bagley & Hillyard, 2015).

## Intersections of Mobility and Rurality

It is important to research the intersections of mobility and rurality because there are unique opportunities and challenges. In this special issue, we add to the growing body of literature that considers these intersections in a variety of international contexts. For instance, Gristy (2019) highlights the challenges faced by rural youth, particularly their reliance on longer bus journeys to school—a routine yet crucial aspect of their daily lives. Silva and colleagues (2021) offer a glimpse into the mobility patterns of youth in the rural regions of Portugal, highlighting how the decisions these youths make contribute to a larger trend of outward migration, subsequently leading to a drain of human capital in rural areas. Cuervo et al. (2019) find that the movement of teachers into Australian rural schools from elsewhere can help to build human capital, develop aspirations, and generate social capital in the Australian context. And in the Chinese context, Cheng (2019) explores how rural parents’ aspiration for children is mainly focused on rural–urban migration via education, which allows rural children to get a better chance of achieving stable, formal employment outside agriculture. Research like this offers insights into the theoretical importance of exploring education and mobility issues in rural areas, however, there remain many other unexplored dimensions. More international research in this area is needed to develop strategies that not only mitigate the challenges but also harness the potential of these mobility patterns to promote sustainable rural development.

## Contributions

In this special issue, we are transported into contexts across the United States of America and China to consider various aspects of mobility. Our empirical articles dive into issues of mobility for researchers, young people, their parents, and teachers. The Rural Connections pieces focus on the lived experiences of two rural educators—one in Upstate New York and one in rural China—

that highlight unintended consequences of metrocentric policies. Finally, the issue concludes with a review of a new book set in the islands of Scotland.

### **Empirical Articles**

Clint Whitten's autoethnographic article offers an inner journey of his rural Queer identity, combining literary analysis and self-reflection to reveal how mobility shaped his literacy development and scholarly identity. He uses literary 'earworms' as reflection points for his life, demonstrating that mobility is not limited to physical or socially constructed spaces and expectations, nor are trajectories linear. This article invites educational practitioners and researchers to recognise mobility as a pathway to opportunity but also as something deeply tied to how students understand who they are. It urges us to think more broadly and inclusively about the kinds of futures we imagine and provide support for young people whose lives are shaped by multiple layers of marginalisation.

Next, Michelle Bailey shares the narratives of two high school juniors living in rural areas of the United States of America who demonstrate the complexity of push and pull factors that influence decisions to stay or leave their community. While one student dreams of becoming an orthodontist in the city, the other hopes to have a farm in the local, rural area. Their stories show that residential and occupational aspirations are entangled with and influenced by multiple factors, including identity, lifestyle, family expectations, and sense of belonging. It is noteworthy that neither considers leaving as automatically tied to upward mobility. This article calls on educators and policymakers to consider and understand students' aspirations of mobility in more nuanced, contextually relevant ways when supporting students in transition to their post-schooling imagined futures.

Semonti Jannat and Ryan Parsons turn our attention to rural China, exploring how parental out-migration can affect educational investment in left-behind children—those who are cared for by relatives while parents temporarily leave home to work in cities. Their study employs longitudinal survey data and propensity score matching to demonstrate that while parental out-migration does not increase immediate educational expenditures, it does increase the likelihood that families begin saving for future education. This finding highlights a temporal dimension of mobility: migration expands parents' social horizons, which in turn reshape their long-term educational planning. The article makes a significant contribution to the literature on mobility by distinguishing between short-term spending and long-term aspirations; it considers how the temporary, yet limited, mobility of parents can influence their expectations for their children's future upward mobility.

Finally, Brian Cartiff, Svetlana Dmitrieva, Ruiqin Gao, Beatrice Quiroz, Alyssa Raygoza, and Angela Starrett examine factors impacting the sense of mobility of teachers living in rural areas of the United States of America, specifically why some choose to leave their schools or the profession entirely. Drawing on a state-wide survey designed on the Job Demands–Resources model, they analyse how different factors, such as job demands, policy, and personal reasons, relate to whether teachers leave the profession completely or shift to a similar role elsewhere. Importantly, they find that teachers in more remote 'rural distant' contexts weigh these factors differently than those in 'rural fringe' schools. This highlights the contextual nature of mobility considerations and challenges blanket narratives of rural teacher turnover. They close by calling for local school districts to reflect on the reasons teachers leave and to utilise community assets to bolster retention.

### **Rural Connections**

In the first of our *Rural Connections* pieces, Holly Marcolina captures the frustration that rural constituents can feel when elected officials focus on urban conditions at the expense of rural conditions. She presents a passionate argument, outlining many of the ignored or misunderstood

practical realities of rural Upstate New York in implementing the regionally unpopular Zero-Emission School Bus Mandate. As in many places around the world, school buses are a fundamental element of student mobility. Marcolina details how this mobility is under threat by a policy that seems better suited for conditions in the metropolis of New York City than the state's extensive regional and rural areas. For example, in the extreme cold of rural New York, bus batteries cannot hold a charge long enough for some bus runs, nor is there infrastructure to charge entire fleets. For a policy that claims to be for the good of all, the city-based politicians' ignorance of the physical and economic impracticalities has caused undue challenges for rural people and places.

Our second piece is by Hanyue Zhong who presents the story of Yu, an aspiring teacher in rural China who challenges the conventional 'stay or leave' identities. Zhong unpacks how youth social and professional mobilities are influenced through complex intersections of factors such as structural constraints (in this case, the hukou registration system) and family obligations rather than simply a matter of individual aspiration. She goes on to detail factors that influence physical, everyday mobilities of rural people, calling into question the assumption that rurality is tied to immobility. Overall, Yu's story succinctly encapsulates the complexities and multiplicities of youth mobilities and prompts us to reconsider urban notions of 'successful' forms of mobility.

### Book Review

Finally, we conclude with John Guenther's review of *Higher Education, Place, and Career Development* by Rosie Alexander. While Guenther and Alexander are both established rural scholars, the book itself considers issues of mobility and place as they relate to career pathways and tertiary education access for rural youth in Scottish island communities, so adding further depth to this special issue. Guenther reflects on his own experiences as he breaks down the key points of each chapter, while both authors stress the importance of recognising and responding to the nuances of place on rural youth mobility. As have so many of the contributing articles, this review and edition reject metrocentric and neoliberal framings of mobility.

### Conclusion

This special issue was designed as a supportive platform for emerging scholars. Whether through quantitative modelling, narrative inquiry, or autoethnography, the articles collectively reveal how people perceive, respond to, and impact the conditions affecting mobility in their lives. As rural education research continues to expand globally, we hope this issue contributes to a growing body of work that sees rurality and mobility not as problems to be solved, but as opportunities for unending possibilities.

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## Retracing Rural and Queer Literacies: An Autoethnographic Dialogue with Rural Queer Scholars

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### Abstract

This autoethnographic essay explores the concepts of mobility and literacy development by unpacking my rural, Queer journey—from closeted farm kid to openly Queer educator to rural, Queer scholar. To guide this autoethnography, I used five grounding texts, each explicitly reflecting rural Queer literacies. These texts were points of inquiry acting as earworms, continuously reminding me of my own rural Queer literacies. Following this dialogical reflection, I reference three understandings related to rural and Queer literacy development focusing on mobility, literacy as identity kits, and the influences of cis-heteronormativity and metronormativity. These understandings underscore the fluidity of mobility as it relates to literacy development, while also illustrating how mobility can complicate lifeworlds and challenge assumptive narratives of rurality and Queerness.

**Keywords:** rural education, literacy, Queer identities, mobility, autoethnography

### Introduction

Mornings in grade school start early when you have an hour-long bus ride to school. Mom dropped me off at Grandma's house since technically our farm was a little too far off Highway 47. Food was not allowed on the bus; however, my grandmother, who taught in the area for over 30 years, made a deal with my school bus driver to allow me to eat my chocolate chip muffins on the bus since I rarely had time before it arrived. The route to school featured Baptist churches, tobacco fields, dirt roads, thick forests, cow pastures, several general stores, ranch-style homes with the United States flag displayed (some a Confederate flag), a few road-crossing chickens, and the old, abandoned Union Level ghost town. Most afternoons started with my Grandma and I sitting on the porch swing as she helped me with homework (cursive lettering, arithmetic, and spelling is what she would say) followed by lessons on sewing, gardening, and cooking while dad fed the cows and mom finished work at the local bank. While rural public schools granted me formal classrooms, Grandma's house was my first rural schoolhouse. In Grandma's garden, I read Mary Pope Osborne's *Magic tree house* series near the fishpond under an azalea bush, completed fractions while learning to bake pies for church gatherings, and listened to every story that Grandma told.

By middle school, my hyperactive, energy forced my parents to drive me to and from school; an hour-long bus ride can be a daunting experience for any youth wanting to be outside and move. The car rides to school echoed similar landscapes, except Mom would get me sausage, egg, and cheese biscuits from the Country Boy's general store near the house and Dad would get me an after-school-snack of peanuts, a Little Debbie cake, and a Coca Cola. By this age, I would either stay home alone while Dad tended to the farm, or he would request my assistance. Often, I'd

blame homework to get out of farming chores. After all, homework was challenging in the age of flip-phones, dial-up internet, and encyclopedias. Nonetheless, I learned the lessons of the farm: every few weeks rotate the cows between the two pastures, burn parts of the underbrush when weather permits, watch for the bull at all times, the electric fence will pop you, cows will stray away when they are about to give birth, and no matter how frustrated your dad gets, curse words never solve the problem. Like my Grandma's house, the farm was another classroom with its own curricula and family history. For example, Great-Grandma Lizzie's house sat in the middle of a pasture and Uncle Arie's house next to the shop.

That route to school never changed much as I moved through elementary, middle, and high school in rural Southside, Virginia (United States). The schools shared similarities, such as, teachers knowing my whole family (one teacher sent me home on the bus with a potted fern for my Grandma), jokes suggesting that being gay was bad (including homophobic slurs), and messages that college was the way out of my rural community (and the only way to get fully educated). As a closeted rural youth, I frequently heard and internalised phrases from classmates and community educators like, "*that's so gay*", "*homosexuals shouldn't get married*", and "*deviants are going to hell*". I never read about any rural Queer folks in my curriculum, just heterosexual relationships (e.g., Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*) and violence (e.g., Hinton's *The Outsiders*, Homer's *Odyssey*, and works by Edgar Allan Poe). Moreover, I never saw intersecting representation on media at home; *The Andy Griffith Show* was the rural and *Project Runway* was the Queer. I straightened out my dialect with a deeper tone, being more careful about how others may have interpreted my speech impediment.

The stories and representations of rural, Queer experiences were vessels passing in the night. The childhood messages sounded clear. If I wanted to come out, to find love, I needed to find refuge in a bustling, metropolitan area with visible Queer life. Yet, I feared an urban Queer community may require me to dilute my rural identity and knowledge. It was a balancing act of de-Queering or de-ruraling myself with no direct path of how to remain whole. These early rural classrooms as spaces informing my current rural Queer literacies and my experiences led to an initial query concerning the concept of mobility related to rural, Queer identity development. As an openly Queer community activist, educator, and scholar, who is deeply invested in rural Queer scholarship (Whitten & Azano, 2025) connected to policy (Thompson et al., 2024; Whitten & Thomas, 2023), visibility politics (Whitten, 2023), and place-based Queer literacy possibilities (Thompson & Whitten, 2024), I was curious how mobility influences rural literacies and how Queer literacies can be critically (co)cultivated within rural spaces. Donehower (2022), when explaining rural literacies and mobility factors, noted, "*rural communities are comprised by distinctive combinations of the literacy beliefs, practices, and values of the different peoples who inhabit, for however long, that rural space*" (p. 193). The (in)visible stories of place and who is accepted were understood in the visuals along the bus route, the lessons learned at Grandma's house, the natural untamed landscapes, and the narratives uplifted in my classrooms.

I retraced and mapped my current rural Queer literacy connections, as an openly rural Queer educator and scholar, back to my childhood rural classrooms, as a closeted rural farmboy, using autoethnographic methods (Chang, 2008; Ellis, 2004) to explore the larger sociocultural phenomena related to rural, Queer literacies and mobility influences. I wondered how my coming out and connecting with my Queerness rekindled my joy and love for my rural identity. Perhaps being more authentically out allowed me to exist more authentically in my rural identity. For this autoethnographic narrative, I incorporated methods such as, "*using self artifact and photo elicitation, discovering self through others' published memoirs and autobiographical essays, [and] reflective memoing*" (Weaver-Hightower, 2012, p. 371). I began with discovering self through five other rural Queer mentor texts which guided my exploration of mobility. When I started my scholarly journey focusing on rural education and Queer identities, there were few resources

other than Mary Gray's (2009) *Out in the Country*. When I revisited these texts, noted in this piece, I took reflective memos, mined my childhood photo albums, and asked my close family questions when needing clarification. These authors and texts provided small earworms, little messages getting stuck in my head sending me down a rabbit hole of childhood memory (Mitchell & Clark, 2021). Conceptual frameworks should feel like a conversation between theoretical thinkers sitting in the same room with you—expanding across time and space. In this article, I invite these authors and texts into a metaphorical car ride back home to my rural schools, Grandma's house, and the family farm, while I unpack the role of mobility and literacy development.

### Foundation Framing for Understanding

I moved away to attend Virginia Tech, about three hours from the farm, where I've lived ever since either attending the university or teaching middle schoolers in the community. It was in this community that I came out. The ride home to the farm was connected by windy, country backroads that took me past my Grandma's house and my former public schools—those spaces were informants of my rural literacies (Donehower, 2022; Gee, 2015). Each space directly and indirectly taught me lessons from hidden curricula (Freire & Macedo, 1987). Upon reflection, I learned that being outside on the farm may grant individuals protection and freedom to explore their Queerness away from community judgement, whereas other individuals may hide their Queerness in schools to protect their wellbeing in an era of anti-Queer legislation sweeping America. Today, when I return home to the farm to visit my parents, leaving my community of Queer kinfolk (rural and urban alike), I often internally self-censor phrases and terms that may be misunderstood or mis-interpreted. For example, my parents shudder at me using the term Queer while also reciting microaggressive homophobic comments. I understood the artistic and multifaceted tenets of both rural and Queer literacies, and I often imagined the possibilities of them co-existing within classroom and community spaces. Living in Southwest, Virginia as a community organiser and teacher, I found many folks were deeply connected to their rural Appalachian lifeworlds while also thriving as Queer individuals.

Rural literacies have been related to the everyday language practices of rural people, literacies learned in rural schooling, and a thirdspace existing in how those two spaces influence each other (Corbett & Donehower, 2017). Moreover, rural literacies have themes connected to sustaining rural communities, influencing place identity, and challenging metrocentrism with hopes of providing social justice for rural places and individuals (Corbett & Donehower, 2017; Donehower, 2022). Donehower (2022) unpacks the close relationship between mobility and rural literacies by arguing that geographic distances in rural settings create a multitude of layers related to rural literacies and how those literacies are influenced by individuals moving in and out of rural spaces. Indeed, the heightened emphasis on transversing space for rural individuals provides additional texture to how the mobility paradigm shifts rural literacy development.

Likewise, Queer literacies are rooted in Queer linguistics, narratives, histories, culture, and lifeworlds, and are often situated in states of flux—similarly influenced by mobility paradigms (Pennell, 2025; Valentine, 2002). In other words, physical and metaphysical situations, alongside mobility, may promote, or hinder, rural and Queer literacy development. Azano and Whitten (2025) operationalise Queer rural literacies as a way “to interpret rural literacies differently, [and] to reject traditional notions of rurality” (p. 10). Often the metaphors from Queer rural literacies can be hooks for rural, Queer folks to communicate against a backdrop of metrocentrism, binaries, and heteronormativity. Understanding Queer rural literacies means to (re)envision rural places as home to Queer literacies, histories, and narratives (Azano & Whitten, 2025). Queer rural literacies acknowledge the spatial inequities and mobility factors that contribute to literacy and identity development.

## Methods

This study combined an autoethnographic methodology (Ellis, 2020) with literary analysis to critically self-engage and reflect on my rural Queer literacy networks and how they inform my scholarship and pedagogical educational practices. In the chapter titled, *Searching for Utopia in rural Queer narratives*, Cummings (2021) argued, “Autoethnography is a methodology that utilizes personal experiences to bridge the connection between the self and culture that produces the self, demonstrating how power works to dominate and marginalize particular groups within society” (p. 155). This understanding of autoethnography highlights the critical nature of understanding how power works to influence the connections between self and the surrounding environment that produces the self. This relationship between power dynamics, selfhood, and environment is particularly important as I consider literacy erasure (Carey, 2023; Eppley, 2011) and how dominant, monolithic narratives can shape who feels valued or who can fully exist within that space.

To guide and focus my critical autoethnographic literary analysis, I implemented the concept of ‘earworms’ as a place to start (Mitchell & Clark, 2021). As a metaphor, earworms represent the thoughts and narratives that get stuck playing on a loop inside one’s head—data earworms. These earworms are memories and stories from my childhood that get stuck playing on a loop as I listen to and read from rural Queer narratives. For this study, the earworms were triggered from phrases and quotes from five rural Queer scholars and authors. The key passages and stories shared from these authors activated my own memories, often from a place of familiarity. I found myself consistently coming back to the same passages to (re)inspire my scholarly inquiry. Furthermore, these earworms created portals of self-reflection, allowing me to revisit my own rural Queer literacy journey in tandem with these researchers and artists.

The texts I explored for earworms were, Mary Gray’s (2009) *Out in the country: Youth media, and Queer visibility*, J.R. Jamison’s (2021) *Hillbilly Queer*, Z. Zane McNeill’s (2022) collection *Y’all means all: The emerging voices Queering Appalachia*, Neema Avashia’s (2023) *Another Appalachia: Coming up Queer and Indian in a mountain place*, and Allison Carey’s (2023) *Double erased: LGBTQ literature in Appalachia*. I first read these texts during my doctoral program because they each explicitly address the role of rural places, education, and community in identity development. During my first read of these texts in my program, I highlighted specific quotes and passages that may have been beneficial during my dissertation scholarship. For this study, I revisited those passages and quotes (my portals of data earworms) that have stuck with me as I have developed scholarship examining the intersections of rural education, Queerness, and literacy. These five foundational texts illustrated how systemic power dynamics and mobility connected to rural (place) and Queer (historically marginalised) identities can shape literacy and a sense of belonging. While I revisited these earworm quotes, I asked myself two questions:

*What lived experiences are relived when connecting the author’s narrative/research to my own rural, Queer literacies?*

*How do those earworms support or challenge my own journey exploring rural, Queer literacies in relation to mobility?*

I selected two passages from each text that best capture the nature of my inquiry. They provided me with the clearest memories that I could revisit in photo albums and conversations with family. Using autoethnography methods, I hoped to invite these authors into a passenger seat as I metaphorically returned home to revisit how my rural and Queer literacies influence my budding scholarship. Like in music, these literary refrains were learned quickly and played on a loop. These literacy earworms signalled from the selected passages connect to my own personal childhood, research, teaching tenure, and scholarship.

Since this was a self-study using literary content and personal experiences, Institutional Review Board (ethics committee) approval was not required.

## Literacy Earworms

### **Mary Gray's (2009) *Out in the Country: Youth Media, and Queer Visibility***

*As theorist Bruno Latour argued, there are histories embedded in the objects we lean on (literally) every day. The Wal-Marts, websites, church-sponsored skate parks, and other symbols of rural space come with their own histories, lessons, and expectations. Youth in this study use these everyday objects of space as props to fashion their identities. In the process, they bind their surroundings together and transform them in complicated ways (p. 170).*

In high school, my friends and I often loitered in the Walmart parking lot sipping our Sonic slushes. Our town Walmart was about 30 minutes from my family farm and conveniently located right next to a major interstate for the southeastern United States. Everything seemed to happen between that Walmart parking lot and Sonic, including blossoming new relationships; I could tell you at least four high school sweetheart stories that started there. Evening entertainment was limited to a bowling alley and movie theatre that shut down and reopened every six months. That parking lot was the place to be after a Friday night football game to gather with friends in a space that was free and centrally located. It was also the place to see Confederate flags attached to truck beds, guns used for hunting hanging in windows, and the occasional local teacher trying to dart by unseen. If you listened, you would hear conversations about school projects and local drama with periodic racist and homophobic slurs. And part of me wanted to just fully assimilate to all of it—get a high school sweetheart to marry (a wife), say and do what all the bullies were doing even if you knew it was wrong, and just pretend so maybe the harassment would fade and my soul could find peace.

In school, it was often my English teachers who would correct the hateful language and provide educational context to the harmful discourses. Those teachers, along with my theatre coaches, showed me new worlds of being, often explaining how narratives and worlds carry with them their own languages, histories, and cultures. I remember in tenth grade being excited to take a scene from Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* and retell it through our own creative outlets; my group made finger puppets and told the story using our youthful slang learned in our community. Reading and writing can give opportunities to transverse and mobilise throughout time and space, learning new social literacies to critically understand personal and community embedded histories.

*But as much as familiarity might breed contempt, it can also foster comfort and provide resources for queer-identity work. Young people focus on forming makeshift public spaces that can alleviate the disenfranchisement of their daily lives. (Gray, 2009, p. 176)*

My school did not have a Gay-Straight Alliance, and my community never hosted a Pride celebration. I also never saw Queer themed books in the school or town library. To be fair, I'm not sure I would have attended an outwardly Queer event or carried around a book with a visible Pride symbol. The internalised homophobia and fear of even being associated with anything Queer made me reject those spaces. While I had played soccer all my life, by ninth grade the increased toxic masculinity and homophobic speech forced me to find new extracurriculars. I needed places of belonging where I could be self-expressive and creative—judgement free zones. Forensics, speech, and drama clubs and community theatre gave me space to be confident, explore new lifeworlds, and create magic. The thrill of being assigned a new character and bringing that character to life kept me passionate about the art of storytelling. I lost hours world-building and creating characters at home playing *The Sims* on the computer and *Pokémon* on the GameBoy. During my junior and senior year in creative writing class, I was given three blank pages of freedom to write about anything, within the communicated school appropriate guidelines. While I never wrote about being Queer due to fear of being outed, I did often write

about trying to keep a mask on, so people didn't see the real me. I became invested in young adult novels that featured individuals with superpowers (e.g., Pittacus Lore's *I am Number Four* series). Sometimes I reimagined stories with gay romantic plot lines, such as Harry and Ron from Rowling's *Harry Potter* being gay lovers. Those fantastical worlds gave me permission to be creative, to imagine futures of love, and to believe in the magic of books as temporary spaces of authentic existence. I did not have to code-switch or be geographically isolated. New lifeworlds and literacies were readily available on the page, and eventually on the screen, regardless of my location.

### **J.R. Jamison's (2021) *Hillbilly Queer***

*The smell of old books, pencils, and floor wax took me right back to Cowan High School. A place that held good memories but painful ones as well. I felt fifteen all over again. The deodorant canister barreled my way as Jacob shouted "faggot." The pain from the slate table bounced through my head. Will these people accept me if I'm the real me? (p. 163)*

I tried my best to never use the restroom during my public school experience, and I quickly got in and out of locker rooms during gym and soccer practice. Nonetheless, I heard enough phrases referencing "faggots", "smear the queers", and "gay boys are sissies" to make me fear for my safety. It did not matter that I thrived in my band class, found joy in theatrical spaces, and relished in reading new stories in English; I was terrified to be anything associated with the term *gay* or *Queer*. While I didn't come out until I was 24, I have always been, and known, I was *Queer* and the question of *accepting the real me* clung with me like the sticky sap on my fingers from pulling tobacco during the summers. The community that uplifted my farming family, showed me how to be sustainable, and rooted me in the solace of nature, equally gave me the phrases and rhetoric that being *Queer* is worthy of abuse and neglect. I wondered about the possibilities of pedagogical practices that embrace the idea of accepting all identities of youth folks in rural communities—closeted and visible (Azano & Whitten, 2025).

*I was stuck between what I was always taught—that being gay was wrong—and what I knew I was becoming—gay. Pastor Lloyd put his hand on my shoulder and gave me a stern look. "Son, you'll know when God's ready for you. (Jamison, 2021, p. 25)*

In ninth grade, I drafted a research project questioning why God provided people with free will since there was so much violence in society. I struggled understanding how people forgave and praised an all-knowing God that knew humans were committing genocides, living in harsh conditions, and suffering. My teacher approved it, and I interviewed an avid church-goer in my community. Following this interview and after scanning the school library, I knew this topic was bigger than my ninth grade essay. I requested to change topics, but my teacher was unyielding and said it was too late. The day the essay was due, I turned in a last-minute paper on chupacabras that my teacher did not approve. It seemed asking questions about free will led me to more questions than answers which I felt I needed for a research report.

I grew up going to Sunday school and service at a small Southern Baptist church. Community and family showed up to that church every Sunday. We went from singing about Jesus loving everyone, just the way you are, to hearing our pastor announce how gays were going to burn in hell. I figured an all-knowing God with a Jesus that loved everyone knew I was gay and still loved me. So, I found it misleading trying to understand why the homophobic churchgoers wanted me to die. However, that never stopped the pastor and folks from the congregation claiming that *Queer* folks were abominations—deviants ready to be slain for their *extra* sinful nature. While I genuinely was curious in the concept of religion and free will, I felt questioning what I was taught and who I was becoming to be overwhelming and insurmountable. Religious trauma can be exiling in a community where everyone emphasises their religious connections.

### **Z. Zane McNeill's (2022) Collection *Y'all Means All: The Emerging Voices Queering Appalachia***

*The dominant metronormative narratives about queerness in Appalachia argue that queer people in Appalachia do not exist, and if they did they would most certainly be suffering. The Queer Appalachia project's social media archive (even with its many recent failures) pushes back against these narratives, asserting that LGBTQIA+ Appalachians do exist and that they navigate joy, suffering, survival, visibility, culture, and community on their own terms. (p. 128)*

As a rural youth, I recognised the gay representations of *Project Runway's* Tim Gunn, *Desperate Housewives's* Lee McDermott, and *Glee's* Kurt Hummel. Meanwhile, *Smokey and the Bandit* and *Dukes of Hazard* were reprised constantly as the standard for rural southern communities. The metro-urban representations poked fun at rural communities as uneducated and uncultured, while the rural standards considered urban folks to be snooty and arrogant. Queerness was segregated to urban spaces and rural spaces lacked visible Queer representations—two conflicting narratives of place and identity. Being rural and Queer felt impossible from anything that I heard or saw. After *Brokeback Mountain* came out, my peers used it as a new joke book to bully any guys they thought were *fruity*—a slang term meaning gay/queer with a history of being used as a homophobic slur. A movie about rural gay joy, survival, visibility, love, and community became another platform for individuals to spread anti-gay rhetoric and mock the Queer community. The consequences of existing as both, rural and Queer, meant either leaving town or not being visibly Queer, both meant sacrificing parts of myself and code switching when needed. The couple of out gay students were often demonised by classmates and adults, and labelled as being ‘flamboyant’, having ‘too much suga’ in their tanks’, and ‘asking for a death wish’ in reference to contracting HIV. Nonetheless, those Queer classmates in school were living testimonies of resilience and disrupted the monolithic idea that Queer folks don’t exist in rural schools.

*Re/understanding the historical and political geographies of these places and the people—the lives, experiences, and physical bodies of those that live t/here--as already having their own distinct and uniquely informed activist histories is part of the responsibilities of activist scholarship. (McNeill, 2022, p. 66-67)*

My Dad recently told me how a group of geologists from Colorado visited the river on the farm decades ago searching for a mineral called tungsten. When their search came up short, they just left. The adults in my family often seem jaded by researchers, citing their overeducation and disregard for the individuals who live off the land. Moreover, they were sceptical of law enforcement, mentioning their hopes of keeping the government out of their business and property. Every once in a blue moon, I’d hear Dad get frustrated and say the government was going to come in one day and take everything they had spent generations building. It seemed the common thread was a deep concern over unfamiliar folks with hidden agendas assuming familiarity to make a quick profit. According to my Dad, my grandfather asked the geologists where he would be able to plant tobacco if they mined the river. The geologist responded, “*with all the money they would be talking, he could buy Miami Beach*”. The stereotype of the poor, uneducated rural farmer in need of civilisation being liberated by education and money created a culture of mistrust. This motif is echoed in *The Beverly Hillbillies* where a rural family strikes oil, becomes millionaires, and moves to a city to become civilised. It was one of my family’s favourite shows.

### **Neema Avashia's (2023) *Another Appalachia: Coming Up Queer and Indian in a Mountain Place***

*I do not know what it means to possess a love of place so strong you remain rootbound even when the soil sometimes rejects your very existence. (p. 159)*

Mom and I would visit Wooten Brother's greenhouse on the other side of the town every spring to get plants for our flower beds and pots for the porch. The array of colours, aromatic floral scents, and thriving insect ecosystems found in that greenhouse captured my attention. I had dreams of getting a part-time job at the local plant nursery; tobacco picking during the summer did not bring me the same joy as hanging out in a greenhouse or garden. We'd get our fair share of pansies, marigolds, petunias, and impatiens to plant in our flowerpots and garden beds. Some plants became deer candy while others became bees' favourite landing pads. One of my favourite parts of gardening was repotting a plant. I'd gently grip the lower part of the stem, give the plastic container a slight squeeze, and tilt the plant sideways to carefully transfer the plant. Just before placing the tightly bound roots into the dirt, Mom would remind me to break the roots up a little bit and add some water to encourage new growth. Occasionally, the plants would wilt due to the new soil and environment, but on other occasions, they flourished and grew wildly. Gardening and visiting the local plant store were warm weather rituals that my Mom and I shared.

Growing up I learned plants were didactic and full of knowledge. They communicated when they needed water, or were being overwatered, and when the soil was not giving them the proper nutrition. When they wanted the sun, they would face it or reach their stems closer to the light. Some of the plants held long histories; the spider plant that hung in my kitchen was propagated from my Grandma's plant that she had been growing for over a decade. Some held their own healing properties; my grandmother was quick to cut into a piece of aloe vera to ease my sunburn. They taught me lessons on resilience; when the soil rejects you, there are other ways to exist—aerial roots, underground rhizomes, propagation, and reseeding.

*My bedtime routine as a child was the same every night. My mom came into my room and patted my back as she sang Gujarati and Sanskrit bhajans to me. I fell asleep each night to the sounds of "Raghupati Raghav" and "Vakratunda Mahakaya," learning the words long before I learned the meanings. (Avashia, 2023, p. 89)*

"Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible told me so," still echoes in my childhood memories. My preschool had afternoon visits to the church that connected to the school. Most Sundays my family would attend our Southern Baptist church service, singing hymns about love in Sunday school and listening to leaders describe how everyone is a sinner and all sinners, especially the homosexuals, were going to hell. "He's got the whole world in His hands," conjures the stiffness of the wooden pews, the joy of singing with a group, and the hopes that the guy who has the whole world in his hands loves me. I learned that Jesus loved me because of a book, and he was powerful enough to hold the planet Earth in his hands. Meanwhile, the adult leaders taught me that love can come with conditions; internally, I questioned those conditions of love—if someone is gay, Jesus won't love them as much, and if he doesn't love them, then how can they have family and community? Eventually, when I did come out, my parents said, "we love you, but we just can't accept your lifestyle" (we are still healing). Love—a word with a range of meanings depending on which narrative is being told and who is telling it.

### **Allison Carey's (2023) *Double Erased: LGBTQ Literature in Appalachia***

*In literature by LGBTQ Appalachian authors, food serves a few primary functions: it brings people together, often transcending generational and ideological differences; it provides pleasure, often representing sublimated sexual pleasures; and it serves as a marker of loss,*

*reminding us of family members who once prepared these foods or warning us of the impending loss of Appalachian foodways. (p. 187)*

“Go ‘cross the road and grab a cup of sugar and an egg,” was a pretty common phrase shared by my Grandma and Mom, especially when I took up baking. Childhood photos captured my Grandma filling pies and icing cakes while I sat on the countertop next to her. Often those pies and cakes ended up at church luncheons where my Grandmas’ recipes competed against the community and congregation. Those recipes, amongst others, were published in the yearly church cookbooks that captured intergenerational food knowledge, including how to prepare and preserve food (e.g., pickling, canning, and jarring recipes). Most recipes were written down by hand, typically in cursive, on index cards and included everyone’s unique language for measurements. During family luncheons, each person had their food responsibility: my Mom had the devilled eggs, Grandma handled the fried chicken and biscuits, my Uncle made homemade banana ice cream, and my aunts would bring casseroles and veggie-based dishes of shifting varieties. The texture, creaminess, and perfect balanced ratio of cheese-to-noodle achieved in my Mom’s macaroni and cheese is unmatched.

This past holiday season, my partner and I cooked dinner for any of our friends who may not have a place to go home to. For Thanksgiving, I made all the foods that reminded me of those luncheons growing up, including sausage balls, devilled eggs, country ham, mashed potatoes, and homemade apple butter. Being in a house with my partner surrounded by Queer kinfolk eating food that reminded me of my rural roots, was the ultimate joy I never thought I’d get to experience.

*Although nature is indeed figured as a refuge in some LGBTQ Appalachian texts, many authors have acknowledged the complexities of Appalachia—both its rural landscape and its cities—for queer Appalachians. Appalachia is of course not always safe or welcoming for its queer inhabitants. Consequently, many queer Appalachians choose to emigrate, whether for the same reasons that other Appalachians have moved—including job and educational opportunities—or for safety or Andrew Wallen’s motivation: the chance to live and love openly among a queer community. (Carey, 2023, p. 154)*

My family and many teachers routinely asked if I was going to stay around and work on the farm. I could tell that Dad had hopes of having a son eager to keep the family farm business going. Truthfully, the farming life seemed appealing; however, if I had stayed, I’m not sure I would exist today. Until the time I came out, I had a persistent understanding that if I was outed, I would have to unlive myself. Leaving for college and starting my teaching career finally gave me the voice, language, and independence to advocate for my own right to exist. Unfortunately, based on combined statistics connected to suicide rates amongst rural males (Cammack et al., 2024; Rural Health Information Hub, n.d.) and Queer individuals (The Trevor Project, 2021; Rural Health Information Hub, n.d.), the probability of me thriving and finding community and self-acceptance was low.

While I haven’t moved back home, my joy in community, scholarship, and activism often makes me revisit my rurality and farming roots. Laying in a hammock overlooking the New River made educational theory easier to conceptualise. Attending and helping organise drag shows in rural Southwest areas became a side passion. Co-developing an enrichment camp for rural middle school learners that is rooted in critical place-based pedagogy reconnected me to the concept of rural cultural wealth (Crumb et al., 2023). These examples provided opportunities to rekindle those tensions around identity and place with hopes of healing the wounds caused by desperately trying to separate and silo my rural and Queer lifeworlds.

## Discussion and Conclusion

This autoethnographic literacy exploration sought to explore experiences that informed my rural, Queer literacies in conversation with other rural, Queer scholars, texts, and authors using the concept of earworms (Mitchell & Clark, 2021). The passages from these texts served as gateways for me to critically reflect on experiences and mobility factors that shaped my rural and Queer literacy and identity development. Metaphorically, these mentor scholars made the drive home more relatable as we shared familiar stories. While I do not share my experiences to create sweeping generalisations, I do believe these narrative data points can provide insight into experiences that shape literacy skills and how literacies can inform identity. Based on their words and my own connected experiences, while also listening for the voices in critical pedagogy, I provide three points of discussion concerning rural education, literacy and identity development, and Queerness.

### ***Queer Rural Literacies Relationship to Mobility***

As evident in this reflection, understandings of literacies can exist in states of flux often transforming based on representation, place (geographic, virtual, and fantastical), and new knowledges of self and society. Introducing more pathways and exposures to diverse literacies from various worldviews can give students a voice for self-advocacy and self-determination. In rural communities with fewer access opportunities and resources for Queer individuals, the role of mobility is particularly important. For example, the nearest visible Queer community was an hour and a half from the farm in a densely populated city. I had to navigate online and media spaces to find and develop my Queer literacy until I was able to move away to college with more independence. Instead of making false assumptions of which literary communities are visible in rural schools, educators and researchers can query the role of mobility's influence on literacy skills. Donehower (2022), explained, "*Grounding curriculum, instruction—and research—'into the immediate locality' means accounting for all 'local' literacies, including those that flow into, and out of, rural communities within the new mobilities paradigm*" (p. 194). Mobility, in relation to rural Queer literacies, presents not only geographic pluralities but also emphasises traversing third spaces (e.g., online, in media, or subtle lessons learned within the environment).

Online platforms celebrating Queer literacies can disrupt access challenges in remote communities, given minimal broadband internet challenges. School fieldtrips to see plays and explore museums can teach languages, histories, and cultures of individuals not represented in everyday curricula and community. Schools, especially in rural communities, that support artistic expression and humanities-based enrichment programs are cultivating a space for youth to discover the possibilities of both rural and Queer literacies by getting to disrupt the norms and transform or imagine spaces of belonging authentically. Rural Queer literacies are not rootbound or confined to isolated pots—they are part of rich, diverse plant ecosystems traversing across geography; rural Queer students may eventually attend an urban school and Queer students in urban areas may go to a rural school. To do anything Queer, is to critically reject binaries and silos of place and identity. When individuals move in and out of places and/or develop their full selves, they carry those literacies representing place and identity.

### ***Rural Queer Literacies as Identity Kits for Survival***

Critical dialogical conditions should foster a multitude of literacies representing local and global experiences, especially from historically marginalised communities. Often literacies can loudly, or subtly, signal to learners' familiarity and comfort. In other words, literacies are a lifeline to identity kits (Gee, 2015) that work to sustain rural and Queer ways of knowing (Azano & Whitten, 2025; Donehower, 2022). When providing introductory subjectivities on early childhood memories in *Rural education and Queer identities: Rural and (out)rooted*, Azano and Whitten (2025) confessed,

*If we've come to understand rural literacies as a primary discourse, an identity kit for understanding who we are and are about in a situation, as a utility for community sustainability, then there were no literacies, no expression, no kit or map or guide for understanding my growing Queer identity as a rural youth (p. 3)*

When curricula and policies attempt erase or censor parts of humanity, they remove access to literacy opportunities. Azano and Whitten (2025) reference the power of literacies allowing for individuals to understand who they are in and the context in which they exist. Understanding the nuances and importance of both Queer and rural literacies may have provided an earlier voice for me. To understand rural Queer literacies is to validate and (re)centre diverse experiences in rural communities in order to combat the threat of stereotypes (Azano et al., 2021) and monolithic narratives that erase identities from rural narratives (Carey, 2023; Eppley, 2011). Embracing Queer rural literacies allows for youth to have the language and voice of their communities which then allows them to sustain their intersecting identities. Educators and researchers may expand conversations into examining the influences of literacy in identity development situated within the context of place(s) and power dynamics.

### **Critically Critiquing Cis-Heteronormativity and Metronormativity through Literacy Development**

I often hear the phrase, if you love and care for someone, or some place, you can hold them accountable. Carey (2023) claimed,

*The erasure of these Appalachian writers also exemplifies the invisibility of Queer Appalachians and other rural queer people within popular representations of homosexuality in the US. Such representations are primarily dominated by images of urban, white, largely upper-middle-class queer subjects, a phenomenon that queer theorist Jack Halberstam has dubbed 'metronormativity.' (p. 3)*

Here, Carey expressed the possible dangers of relying on dominant narratives and popular representations to tell stories of place and humanity. Those dominant narratives can create devastating and isolating stereotypes of rural places and Queer individuals. Just as cis-heteronormativity upholds cisgender and heterosexual identities as the norm in American society, metronormativity places urban environments at the core of Queer lifeworlds. Critically critiquing literacies that challenge cis-heteronormativity and metronormativity requires individuals to audit their own assumptions and (re)examine issues of stereotype threat. Educators and researchers engaging in critical literacy scholarship may question what language and histories are emphasised in place and which identities are forced to migrate for safety and belonging.

By critically exploring both my rural and Queer literacy development, I better understand the ways in which farming, cooking, gardening, reading, and writing reconnect me to my communities while also acknowledging harms from religious and homophobic rhetoric. Normative assumptions risk potentially erasing complex intersecting literacies and lived experiences.

### **A Final Note**

In an episode of The A24 Podcast titled *All the ways to be* (Washington & Vuong, 2020), Vietnamese American poet Ocean Vuong said,

*Queerness in a way saved my life... Often we see queerness as deprivation. But when I look at my life, I saw that queerness demanded an alternative innovation from me. I had to make alternative routes; it made me curious; it made me ask, 'Is this enough for me?' (16:41)*

This quote lingers in my mind, an earworm playing on a loop, because I also consider my rurality as a life saver—minus the homophobic rhetoric, occasional bully, and institutionalised religion

spreading hate. Returning to my roots through didactic stories of gardening, cooking, and exploring the farm reminds me of the resilience that rural Queer people possess in abundance. The current anti-Queer sociopolitical climate targeting youth in America, seeks to erase Queer identities from existence; however, Queer folks will continue to exist inside public school classrooms and in communities. I hope this autoethnographic essay encourages educators and scholars to consider intersections of literacy development, query how mobility can complicate lifeworlds, and disrupt dominant metronormative and cis-heterosexual assumptions. That childhood bus ride instilled in me, alongside many other rural youths, that being mobile is connected to education, while also reminding me that stories and literacies of place shape youths' ability to communicate and authentically exist. After all, rural school buses have always known Queer youths sharing hopes and dreams of their places and futures, while envisioning a world where love and acceptance conquers all geographic boundaries.

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### Between Home and Opportunity: Sociocultural Factors in Rural Student Perceptions of Geographic and Socioeconomic Mobilities

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#### Abstract

Much of the academic literature on postsecondary planning for rural students has presented socioeconomic and geographic mobilities as intrinsically linked, arguing that a central dilemma for rural students is whether to stay in their home communities or leave to pursue upward socioeconomic mobility. The present narrative study explores this dilemma from the perspective of two high school juniors from one rural high school in the United States. Though Allen and Gabriella (pseudonyms) attended the same high school, their conceptualisations of their futures were vastly different. Gabriella dreamed of becoming an orthodontist and living in a city. Allen dreamed of owning his own agricultural business and staying in the local community. This article examines each student's thought process as they chose whether or not to leave their home community. Findings indicate that a combination of sociocultural factors 'push' or 'pull' students in their respective directions. These factors include students' lifestyle aspirations, their social identities and relationships with their community, and their views on the role of higher education in financial success. This suggests that rural students' residential aspirations are more nuanced, individualised, and context-dependent than previously thought.

**Keywords:** *career decision-making, post-secondary education, rural schools and communities, student aspirations*

#### Introduction

Rural students comprise 24% of the United States' high school enrolment (Sowl & Crain, 2021). These students have unique strengths and face unique challenges (Crumb et al., 2023; Tieken & Montgomery, 2021). For example, rural youth tend to live near extended family and have close-knit social networks, with many reporting that they feel well-supported in their communities (Byun et al., 2012). However, economic shifts in rural communities have left many youths facing a series of complex decisions when planning for their futures. Traditional blue-collar industries in rural communities have been rapidly declining, leaving lower-wage service jobs in their wake (Ruiz & Perna, 2017). This has led some scholars to argue that higher education is important for rural youth as a vehicle for social mobility (Sowl & Crain, 2021).

Yet, some rural communities remain ambivalent toward this idea (Sherman & Sage, 2011). In their study of a small town in California, Sherman and Sage (2011) found that the community did not want their children to leave home to pursue higher education; yet they recognised that higher education was a "necessary evil" if they wanted their children to succeed economically (Sherman & Sage, 2011, p. 7). But why is higher education a necessary evil? First, many rural communities exist in education deserts, or areas with no accessible postsecondary options (Hillman, 2016). This means that youth must travel great distances to attend college (Hillman & Weichman, 2016;

Kim, 2019). Second, many industries requiring higher education are located in urban areas (Thomas & Fulkerson, 2020), meaning that students may have to leave their communities permanently to pursue employment that requires higher education. For rural youth, this leads to what Means and colleagues called “*the tension of staying or going*” (p. 555). In many studies, rural youth link geographic mobility with socioeconomic mobility, and must decide whether to leave their community to pursue that mobility or stay and potentially miss out on ‘better’ economic outcomes (see Carr & Kefalas, 2009; Cox et al., 2014; Means et al., 2016; Petrin et al., 2014). This phenomenon not only occurs in the United States, but globally as well (see Rönnlund, 2020; Webb et al., 2024).

This article, part of a larger narrative study on postsecondary decision-making for students from one rural high school in the United States, illustrates how two focal students think about the relationship between geographic mobility, higher education, and socioeconomic mobility. This study explored students’ postsecondary future selves, or the future lives that students envision for themselves (Carey, 2021; 2024). This exploration of the students’ imagined futures revealed holistic insights into how students make decisions to reach those futures. Findings indicate that students’ lifestyle aspirations play as much of a role as educational or career aspirations in their decisions to stay or leave the community. Further, findings reveal that other sociocultural factors, such as the students’ social identities and the beliefs of their family members, influence the students’ decisions more than local labour market conditions.

## Literature Review

### ***Changing Local Economies and Choosing to Stay or Leave***

Economic opportunity structures (Parsons, 2022) in rural communities have undergone massive shifts in recent decades, as traditional rural industries, such as manufacturing, agriculture, and mining, have become increasingly outsourced, corporatised, or automated (Corbett, 2021; Ruiz & Perna, 2017; Thomas et al., 2011). This means that the high-wage, blue-collar jobs on which rural communities have traditionally relied on are becoming increasingly scarce (Ruiz & Perna, 2017), though not completely obsolete (Carnevale et al., 2024a). Meanwhile, more lucrative industries that require postsecondary credentials, such as technology and finance, are concentrated in urban areas, where educational attainment is higher (Kim, 2019; McDonough et al., 2010). Thus, attending college (two- or four-year), once considered an option, is now perceived by some rural communities as a necessity for upward mobility (Carr & Kefalas, 2009; Sherman & Sage, 2011). Further, since jobs requiring higher education are concentrated in urban areas, some rural youth feel they must leave their home communities permanently (Means et al., 2016; Parsons, 2022; Petrin et al., 2014).

In their seminal work on postsecondary planning for rural youth in the United States, Carr and Kefalas (2009) created a typology of students based on their postsecondary plans. There were those who leave to pursue education (and never return), those who never leave their home communities, and those in between. The leavers, dubbed ‘achievers’, performed well academically and had high educational aspirations. The ‘stayers’ did not perform as well academically and had lower educational aspirations (Carr & Kefalas, 2009). This typology became a mainstay in the literature for many years, with countless studies using variations on these categories (see for example Cox et al., 2014; Parsons, 2022; Petrin et al., 2014; Sherman & Sage, 2011). Though the literature has trended away from the ‘achiever/stayer’ language, the central postsecondary dilemma for rural students in many studies was what Means and colleagues (2016) called “*the tension of staying or going*” (p. 555). Many studies centred around the act of going, or what differentiates a leaver identity from a stayer one. For example, Petrin and colleagues (2014) found that the biggest motivational factor in developing a stayer or leaver identity is student perception of local employment opportunities. Leavers did not believe there were lucrative job

opportunities in their home communities. Stayers were more likely to believe that they could find good jobs within their home communities. Cox and colleagues (2014) found that both stayers and leavers made practical decisions. Stayers perceived staying as a sounder financial choice, because they were able to utilise local resources (such as community college). They categorised the leavers as being more risk tolerant, though leaver participants cited upward socioeconomic mobility as the reason they wanted to leave. However, stayers tended to come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds than leavers (Ali & McWhirter, 2006; Hutchins et al., 2012). Despite this, stayers also might have access to more local social capital than leavers, rooting them more closely to the community (Rönnlund, 2020).

This tension is not to be taken lightly, as there can be real consequences for leaving, considering that rural youth typically have tight-knit social networks and extended family in their home communities (Byun et al., 2012; Puente, 2020; Sims et al., 2021). Moving away from home can be a significant sacrifice for any person but is especially so for rural youth. Because of the geographic isolation of rural communities, returning home to visit family can be more logistically difficult for rural youth. Many rural communities even lie in education deserts, making higher education options difficult to access. (Hillman & Weichman, 2016; Kim, 2019). Overall, for rural youth planning their futures, residential aspirations are just as, if not more, important than educational or career aspirations. This is something that youth themselves are aware of, as rural youth are more likely than urban or suburban youth to think about their residential aspirations (Wang et al., 2021).

### **Higher Education, Career, and Residential Aspirations**

College, career, and residential aspirations are inherently linked in the minds of rural youth (McDonough et al., 2010). Some rural students receive messaging in school that ties higher education directly to career. In her study of postsecondary messaging in a rural high school, Tieken (2016) observed adults offering students a “*jobs-oriented rationale for higher education*” (p. 204). Kryst et al. (2018) and Tieken (2016) both found that school counsellors and administrators believed that higher education was primarily for vocational purposes and encouraged students to attend only if it was required for their desired careers. For some rural students, higher education does not seem worthwhile, as the jobs available in their communities do not require it (McDonough et al., 2010; Ruiz & Perna, 2017). Means and colleagues (2016) found that students who did want to pursue higher education felt they would need to permanently leave their communities. These student perceptions make sense, given the changes in the rural economic landscape and the concentration of jobs requiring higher education in urban areas.

Social identities also affect student thinking. For example, Hallmark and Ardoin (2021) found community narratives that feminised higher education in their study of two rural communities in the southeastern United States. In these communities, the careers that required higher education were typically those found in care fields (e.g., healthcare, social work, education, etc.). Because care fields were considered feminine, and higher education was solely viewed as vocational in these communities, higher education became feminised. Importantly, jobs in care fields were available in the local communities, meaning that girls were able to pursue higher education without permanently leaving their community—an option which boys may not have felt was open to them (Hallmark & Ardoin, 2021). Sharp and colleagues (2020) also found that rural boys tended to have lower educational aspirations than girls because of beliefs about the gendered nature of certain occupations. They suggested that the decline in blue-collar industries may necessitate a shift in gendered perceptions of care work and other ‘feminine fields’ (Sharp et al., 2020).

Race is also an important factor. Studies found that, in some Black and Latine rural communities, higher education credentials were seen as a means for individual and community improvement,

which gave higher education more intrinsic value (Boettcher et al., 2022; Puente, 2020; 2022). Some rural students of colour, particularly Black and Latine students, did not see the need to permanently leave their communities, as they saw pursuing higher education was a way to give back to or improve their home communities (Boettcher et al., 2022; Puente, 2020; 2022). However, Black and Latine rural students may also feel ambivalent about college. Pursuing higher education is perceived as risky by some rural students of colour, as the economic return on their investment might be lower than that of their white peers (Parsons, 2022). Further, college might be a particularly isolating experience as few of their classmates might share their combined racial and geographic identities (Woldoff et al., 2011).

### **Postsecondary Future Selves**

One of the guiding conceptual frameworks for the larger narrative study underpinning this article is postsecondary future selves (Carey, 2021; 2024). In his study on the college and career aspirations of Black and Latino boys from lower socioeconomic backgrounds attending a college preparatory high school in the United States, Carey (2021) explored the students' imagined future lives across three domains: college, career, and condition. Condition was defined as lifestyle or material wellbeing (e.g., leisure activities, income level, family life). Carey found that all three domains were connected in students' minds, as participants cited narratives that linked college going with higher paying jobs and, therefore, enough financial resources to support a family and leisure activities. Students' conceptions of their postsecondary future selves did not exist in a vacuum but were context-dependent and influenced by other actors within students' social world.

The present narrative study made two slight adjustments to Carey's (2021; 2024) framework. To examine the "*tension of staying or going*" (Means et al., 2016, p. 555), a fourth domain of location was added. In Rönnlund's (2020) study of the residential aspirations of rural Swedish youth, she conceptualised "*imagined spatial futures*" (p. 125) as students' hoped-for geographic locations as adults, which were often juxtaposed with students' current spatial reality. Further, Carey's (2021) participants attended a college preparatory high school, college was heavily emphasised in their educational context. However, because the research site of this study was a comprehensive high school, and because not all participants intended to pursue higher education, the 'college' domain was renamed 'education/training' to reflect the wider variety of paths that study participants may take.

### **Methods**

This article drew from a larger narrative inquiry study that focused on postsecondary planning for a group of students from one rural high school in a mid-Atlantic state in the United States. This study was approved by the University of Delaware's Institutional Review Board (#2042516-1). The research questions for the larger study were as follows:

1. How do high school juniors from one rural community think about life after high school and conceptualise their postsecondary future selves across the domains of education/training, career, condition, and location?
2. How do students factor economic and spatial considerations into their visions of their postsecondary future selves?
3. How are students' visions of their postsecondary future selves situated within their current familial, geographic, social, and cultural contexts?

This article focuses on the findings of Research Question 2, which explored students' perceptions of economic opportunities in their home community.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

For the larger study, five 11<sup>th</sup> grade students (16–17-year-olds) from one rural high school were interviewed three times. The first interview focused on students' backgrounds and past educational experiences. The second interview focused on students' current lives and their postsecondary plans. The final interview tasked students with imagining their postsecondary future selves.

Data were analysed narratively. Interview audio files were anonymised and then transcribed using Otter Ai. Each student's set of transcripts was then re-storied (Rolón Dow & Bailey, 2022) into life stories, which were organised around Carey's (2021) postsecondary future selves domains. These stories became the unit of analysis in order to (1) analyse narratives holistically and directly compare participant experiences (Polkinghorne, 1995); (2) identify important elements of meaning, including key characters, setting, and time (Coulter & Smith, 2009); and (3) present a clearer and more succinct narrative for readers, which aids in transparency (Rolón Dow & Bailey, 2022). The stories were then analysed as literary texts, identifying literary elements such as setting, characters, symbols, themes, and metaphors (Coulter & Smith, 2009). After that, they were analysed using a Three-Dimensional Space Analysis (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Ollerenshaw & Cresswell, 2002) to examine links between psychological, social, cultural, temporal, and spatial story elements. This article explores the narratives of two focal students, Allen and Gabriella (pseudonyms).

### **Research Site and Participants**

Southeast High School (pseudonym) was a small high school that served approximately 1,000 students, grades 9-12. It was classified as 'fringe rural' by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). The student population was 85% white, and 40% of students were considered economically disadvantaged (State Department of Education, 2025). Roughly one third of Southeast graduates pursued postsecondary education, 40% entered the workforce directly after high school, and 5% enlisted in the military (State Department of Education, 2025). According to study participants, major industries in the community included agriculture, healthcare, and construction.

Two students were chosen as focal students for this article. Allen and Gabriella were chosen because they represent heterogeneity among participants (Small & Calarco, 2022). The cases of Allen and Gabriella illuminated both tensions and resonant threads (Clandinin, 2016) in postsecondary decision-making for students from the Southeast community.

### **Findings**

Findings from the present study corroborated that 'leaver' and 'stayer' were not fixed identities, but rather choices arising from a cost-benefit analysis that participants engaged in when making postsecondary decisions. Students' educational, career, and condition aspirations (including residential aspirations) were shaped by a complex set of sociocultural factors, some of which 'pushed' students away and some of which 'pulled' them closer to the community. Interestingly, the same sociocultural factors that pushed one student pulled the other.

### **Focal Students' Present and Future Selves**

The first 'pull/push' factor for Gabriella and Allen were their visions for their postsecondary future selves (Carey, 2021). Gabriella's imagined future included city amenities and having more Black cultural experiences, pushing her from Southeast. Allen's imagined future included a career in agriculture and a rural lifestyle, including owning multiple acres of land, pulling him toward the Southeast community.

**Gabriella.** Gabriella was a straight-A student at Southeast High. She took a rigorous course load, including two Advanced Placement<sup>1</sup> courses, as well as advanced trigonometry and advanced chemistry. She claimed her “*whole life is school*”. At Southeast, she participated in a community service club, the prom committee, and a career mentorship program for girls.

Gabriella was Black, female, heterosexual, and originally from a major metropolitan area. Gabriella moved to the Southeast community the summer before she began high school. Her hometown remained a major part of her identity. She said she was quick to correct those who forgot where she was originally from: “*a lot of my [extended] family, they just kind of forget about it, because we moved, but I’m like, ‘I’m still from [major city]!’*” Gabriella also said that her hometown influenced how she interacted with the world, discussing her open and direct communication style, which she attributed to being socialised in her city.

Gabriella moved to Southeast with her stepmom, her stepmom’s girlfriend, and her younger sister. Gabriella still had a relationship with her biological mother and her older siblings who lived in her hometown, but Gabriella’s stepmom was her primary caretaker. Gabriella admitted that her family had “*money problems*” and sought out Southeast for its lower cost of living. However, at times, Gabriella and her family felt othered in the community as a Black, same sex headed household. Yet Gabriella also expressed positive sentiments toward Southeast, saying, “*other than the cultural differences, I like [Southeast] a lot*”.

For her future self, Gabriella at 36-years old will be living her childhood dream of being an orthodontist. After high school, she will attend a Historically Black College or University (HBCU). After college, she will go to dental school, where she will earn a coveted orthodontics residency. She will pass all the certification exams and work in an orthodontics office. She will be very happy at this job and have no desire to start her own practice.

Gabriella will live in a city as an adult—maybe her hometown, but maybe not. She will share an apartment with her best friend during college and dental school. She may be living with a romantic partner at 36. Children might be on the horizon for Gabriella—she said she is open to this idea, but it is not integral to her happiness. She will be content to live in her apartment with her partner and an orange or grey cat. Gabriella will enjoy the city amenities, such as easy access to shopping centres and entertainment venues, and she will relish the “*background noise*” of the busy city streets. Outside of work, Gabriella will enjoy hanging out with her friends and partner, reading, shopping, knitting, and volunteering in her local community.

**Allen.** Allen has lived in the Southeast community his entire life and attended a private Christian school until he began high school at Southeast High. In middle school, he discovered his love of music. Allen still took piano lessons from his middle-school chorus instructor and occasionally sang or played in various community ensembles. He did well in school but was sceptical of programs such as Advanced Placement, dual enrolment at a local college, and other types of college preparation courses. At school, he was involved in the Southeast band program, a positive behaviour program, and the school play. Allen was white, male, heterosexual, Christian, and a self-described “*country kid*.” Allen’s Christian and rural identities were the most salient for him. Allen lived with his Mom and Dad. He had two older siblings who no longer lived at home. One of Allen’s main goals was to remain in the Southeast community. He had a deep love for the community, noting that he is proud to be from Southeast.

At 36, Allen will own his own trucking company, or perhaps his own farm. After graduating from high school, Allen will work for a local farm as a truck driver for five or six years. This work experience will allow him to obtain his Commercial Driver’s License (CDL) and give him insight into the business aspects of both trucking and farming. When Allen is ready to branch out on his

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<sup>1</sup> Advanced Placement is a program in the United States run by the College Board where students take courses with a standardised curriculum and exams which can earn them postsecondary credits.

own, his boss will invest startup capital in Allen's business. Once Allen's business is successful, he will buy his former boss's portion of the business and own it outright.

Allen will live in a small village within the Southeast school district, close to his old boss's farm. He will have a wife and three or four children. He and his wife will build their own house, with a few acres of land and a stream running through the property. Allen will take a keen interest in his children's activities, attending their games, performances, and other events. He will support the community by donating money to the Southeast band program, sponsoring a local youth sports team, and tithing to his church.

Allen's and Gabriella's visions for the future heavily relied on their future conditions and locations. For Allen, the physical and social distance between his present reality and his envisioned future was smaller, which pulled him to stay in the community. Gabriella's present reality was further away from her envisioned future, pushing her to live somewhere else. Both students' lifestyle and residential aspirations seemed to bear as much weight on their respective decisions as their educational and career aspirations.

### ***Social Identities and Relationship to the Community***

Gabriella and Allen had quite different social identities, which led them to experience Southeast differently. Allen's social identities pulled him closer to the community. However, Gabriella experienced marginalisation and othering in Southeast due to her social identities. This affected her relationship with the community and pushed her away.

Allen held identities that were privileged in Southeast and society more broadly (such as white, male, and middle class). In addition to his "country" identity, his values and religious beliefs aligned with the community's. Further, his family had an extensive local social network. This led Allen to a sense of belonging within the community. He stated:

*We're very, very close to each other. We're very, very much a family. It's very easy to bicker with each other and not get along. But when somebody new comes along... we don't really like them for a while. We're very private, we're very personal... I love [the Southeast community]. I am very proud to be from [Southeast].*

Allen's sense of belonging in the Southeast community instilled in him both a sense of pride and an identity as a Southeast resident. He enjoyed an insider status in the community that was not afforded to all residents, particularly "new" ones. Simultaneously, Allen viewed Southeast as "very much a family," indicating a strong bond with the local community, which pulled him toward staying.

Gabriella held identities that were minoritised more broadly (e.g., Black, female, and working class). These identities were perhaps even more heavily marginalised within the Southeast community, given that the community was predominantly white and tended to have traditional views around gender. In addition, because Gabriella was relatively new to the community, she was not integrated into the community to the same extent as Allen, perhaps encountering the distrust of newcomers described by Allen. Her outsider status was exacerbated by the fact that her caregivers were a same-sex couple.

*It's not a very open place for people of colour, or for queer people. So, it's really hard to try to not play into the aggressive stereotypes by acting out about everything, but also finding that balance between sticking up for what I believe in. So, sometimes when jokes are made, I have to decide whether I want to just laugh it off and pretend that that wasn't just said, or if I want to react to this and possibly lose a friendship or just being comfortable around someone... Because it's like, I don't really know how to find that balance between what I believe in and where I'm living at.*

Though Gabriella said positive things about Southeast, she was honest about her experiences there. She internally struggled with whether and when to stand up for herself, indicating a tension between the need to assert her dignity and the need to protect herself in those moments. Similar to Allen, one of Gabriella's most salient identities was her geographic background. While her race and family composition certainly othered Gabriella in Southeast, as these identities were more visible there than in her hometown, Gabriella also identified as a "city girl", which she believed set her apart from the community.

The students' relationships with the community reflected their residential aspirations. Allen felt such a strong connection to the Southeast community that he described it as a "family". This strong sense of community pulled him to stay. Gabriella did not feel this way about Southeast; she mentioned wanting to attend a Historically Black College or University (HBCU) specifically because she was looking for a family-like community.

*For the HBCU decision, that was just because I wanted to be around people with the same experiences—I want to be around, I guess, "my people," or whatever. But also, it's just like, seeing stuff on the internet and seeing how fun and connected HBCUs are. I like that. I like that sense of family, almost.*

While Allen described Southeast as a "family", it is telling that Gabriella used that word to describe the community she hoped to find in the future. Gabriella wanted to be around people who understood her and had shared experiences, pushing her away from Southeast and toward an imagined future community where she could find "her people".

While Gabriella sought refuge in higher education, Allen's identity as a Southeast resident pushed him from going to college. He explained:

*Everybody kind of looks at [Southeast] like, we're the farm kids. We're not that academically great. We're [Southeast]; we don't know how to spell. And so that's a very interesting thing that has to be worked with sometimes. But yeah, I'm very proud to be from [Southeast]. I know a lot of really smart people from [Southeast]... We're pretty intelligent. But we're farmers. We don't really use our intelligence to go to college with it. We do other things with it.*

Though Southeast was located in a predominantly rural county, Allen believed that other nearby towns associated Southeast with negative rural stereotypes, such as lack of intelligence. Interestingly, while refuting this stereotype, Allen drew a distinction between how Southeast residents "use [their] intelligence" and what is expected (i.e. to go to college). Allen did not seem to challenge the notion that rurality and higher education were mutually exclusive. Instead, he inadvertently set up a stayer/leaver dichotomy, in which some Southeast residents forgo college and instead use their talents in local agricultural endeavours. Allen's meaning-making of his Southeast identity may be pushing him from college and pulling him toward his career aspiration of becoming a farmer.

Allen's relationship with the Southeast community indicated both his sense of belonging there and his sense of identity as a Southeast resident. His sense of belonging pulled him toward the community. His belief that a Southeast identity conflicted with college attendance may have pushed him from higher education. Gabriella had the opposite experience, which pushed her away from Southeast and pulled her toward higher education. Though Gabriella embodied a leaver identity in some ways—she was academically high achieving and aspired to higher education—she was clear that her residential aspirations hinged on her search for community, not due to local labour market conditions. Though Allen was also academically high achieving, he aspired to stay in the local community because of his identity and sense of belonging.

### **Higher Education and Socioeconomic Mobility**

Gabriella and Allen's beliefs about higher education and financial success were also push/pull factors. Gabriella's belief that higher education was tied directly to socioeconomic success pushed her to explore higher education options outside of the Southeast community. These beliefs were shaped by messages she received from her family about success, as well as her own personal experiences. Similarly, Allen's scepticism that higher education led to socioeconomic success pulled him toward starting his career in the Southeast community directly after high school. This scepticism had also been formed by family messaging and personal experience.

Gabriella valued higher education, both for her career advancement and for the potential of upward socioeconomic mobility.

*My family, we've always had money problems. And that's part of why I've chosen such a big career with such a big [salary] ... because I don't want to have these money problems. And so, if I don't get these scholarships, I have no way of going to college and I have no way of becoming what I want to be, in my opinion. So, I think that—because of all the pressure—my older brother, he did not go to college, and he graduated like three years ago. He didn't go to college; he went to a trade school like two years after he graduated. And he barely passed that. And he's doing nothing. So [my biological mom is] always like, “Oh, this is my problem child. And this is the child that's going to go somewhere.” So, [there's] always this pressure that's kind of like, “you need to do this, you need to do that.”*

Gabriella felt pressure to excel academically, not only because her family—particularly her biological mother—viewed her as the family member who was “going to go somewhere”, but also because Gabriella felt she could not afford college without scholarships. She specifically compared herself to her older brother; her aspirations were due, in part, to viewing her brother's journey as a cautionary tale. She believed that attaining advanced degrees and pursuing a specific goal (i.e. to become an orthodontist) would keep her from “doing nothing”. Gabriella wanted to pursue orthodontics because of the salary and prestige a career in medicine would provide, which would align with her family's high expectations.

Allen was critical of the notion that higher education was needed for socioeconomic mobility.

*The idea that, if you're working a physical labour job, you're going to be poor your whole life, like, “I gotta get to college. I gotta get that desk job because that's what's going to pay the bills easily.” That's what we've been taught.*

Allen believed that societal messaging about college was tied to a perception that blue-collar jobs do not pay as well as white-collar jobs, meaning that young people are taught to aspire to white-collar jobs. However, Allen cited evidence from his own life that contradicted these messages.

*Some people who go to college for ten years—I mean, my one uncle went to college, has degrees in computer science, mathematical engineering, mathematical research, all sorts of things. And [his family is doing better financially because] he changed jobs recently. But before, when he was teaching [at a university], they were struggling a little bit more. And I guess I come from the other opinion. Both my parents work more physical jobs, and we do fine financially.*

Allen compared the experiences of his uncle to those of his own parents. While he believed that societal narratives push white-collar jobs, seeing the financial difficulties of his uncle made Allen question those narratives. Therefore, Allen was sceptical of the idea that higher education and white-collar jobs were the key to socioeconomic mobility. This pulled Allen toward the idea of a “physical” or blue-collar job, which he believed would be more financially secure.

Gabriella and Allen each had different views of higher education and its relation to socioeconomic mobility. While Gabriella had faith that higher education would be her best

pathway to financial stability, Allen was unconvinced of this idea. Both students' perceptions of higher education stemmed from their families and personal experiences. Gabriella experienced family pressure to "go somewhere" or to be more successful than her older siblings. Allen, on the other hand, believed that higher education was not necessarily tied to better financial outcomes after personally witnessing people with high school diplomas outearn those with advanced degrees. Allen and Gabriella largely based their postsecondary planning on their perceptions of opportunities. Iloh (2018) argued that students' perceptions of opportunities are just as important as 'real' opportunities. These perceptions, informed by family messaging and experiential knowledge, served as push/pull factors for the students, tugging each of them toward a leaving or staying decision.

### Discussion and Directions for Future Research

Prior studies found that rural students linked geographic mobility with socioeconomic mobility in their college and career aspirations, believing that they must leave their home communities for better economic opportunities (see Carr & Kefalas, 2009; Means et al., 2016; Parsons, 2022; Sherman & Sage, 2011). While there is some evidence that Allen and Gabriella linked their career and residential aspirations in their minds, neither's rationale for staying or leaving Southeast was about socioeconomic mobility. Ultimately, each student experienced sociocultural factors that either pulled them toward or pushed them away from their home community. Community relationships and condition aspirations (e.g. family life, lifestyle, material wellbeing) were the two biggest motivators for each student's residential aspirations—not their perceptions of local labour market conditions. However, it is important to note that each student's relationship with the Southeast community also influenced their perceptions of economic opportunity within the community. The students' perceptions of higher education were also closely linked with their desire to stay or leave Southeast.

Allen did not believe that he needed to leave Southeast for economic success; in fact, he believed that he could be very successful in an agricultural career in Southeast. He identified the economic opportunity structures in Southeast and had both the cultural knowledge and social network to thrive in agriculture. This echoes Rönnlund's (2020) findings that students with more social and cultural capital in their communities had stronger stayer identities. Importantly though, Allen's primary motivators to stay in Southeast were his condition aspirations and his love for the community. His condition aspirations (owning land and connection to nature) made Southeast a desirable place to stay. In addition, his positive connection to Southeast likely aided the social and cultural capital Allen drew on as he developed his career aspirations, indicating that a positive relationship with the community may influence students' perceptions of local career opportunities.

For her part, Gabriella also did not necessarily believe that she had to leave Southeast for economic success. Rather, her desire to leave Southeast was linked to both her condition aspirations and her relationships with the local community. In addition to desiring city amenities, Gabriella sought a community that was more aligned with her values and cultural identity. She did not have the same social and cultural capital as Allen in Southeast. Crumb and colleagues (2023) note that doubly minoritised rural residents, like residents of colour or LGBTQ+ residents, often face great pressure to adopt local cultural, political, and religious norms to access social and cultural capital. Gabriella did not wish to do this, which she attributed to her "city girl" identity. Interestingly, both Allen and Gabriella had strong 'country' and 'city' identities, respectively; their perceptions of themselves also likely influenced their residential aspirations. Ultimately, Gabriella's desire to leave Southeast was not explicitly linked to upward socioeconomic mobility, though she did seem to implicitly believe that she would be more successful building her social capital in a community that was a better fit for her.

However, understanding each student's staying/leaving decision would be incomplete without understanding their perceptions of higher education. Gabriella strongly believed that higher education was her pathway to upward socioeconomic mobility. Gabriella stated that part of the draw of a career in medicine was the salary. Therefore, she viewed higher education as the link between her current economic condition and her desired economic condition. Allen did not see such a link for himself, and was sceptical that this link existed at all, citing evidence from his own family. This indicates that, regardless of whether students choose to pursue higher education, their perception of higher education looms large in the development of career aspirations.

The focal students' perceptions of higher education may also be linked to residential aspirations as well. Allen viewed higher education as opposed to a Southeast identity, stating, "*we don't really use our intelligence to go to college with it. We do other things with it*". This indicates that Allen may have seen higher education as incompatible with his residential aspirations. For Gabriella, the opposite is true. She saw college as a potential place of belonging, after feeling ostracised in Southeast. Each student's decision to stay or leave was closely tied to their beliefs about higher education. Allen's scepticism of higher education aligned with his desire to stay in Southeast, while Gabriella's desire to attend college aligned with her desire to leave.

The students' perceptions of opportunity do largely match actual patterns of opportunity. Allen's assessment that a postsecondary degree was not necessary for success in his chosen career may be correct. Using Carnevale et al. (2024a) recent work on career trends as a measurement of such patterns of opportunity, they found that blue-collar jobs are still more stable and higher paying in rural areas than urban areas in the United States. They also found that white men without a postsecondary degree fare better economically in rural areas than in urban or suburban areas. However, the same is not true for white women or people of colour. Carnevale and colleagues observed that only 21% of rural women with a high school diploma have high paying, full-time jobs (compared with 53% of men). Further, Black Americans only have a 34% chance of securing a high paying, full-time job in rural areas, compared with a 42% chance in urban areas (Carnevale et al., 2024a). Therefore, Gabriella's assessment that she would be more successful if she pursues higher education and moves to an urban area may also be correct. Whether they realised it or not, both students' perceptions of their economic opportunities matched wider patterns of opportunity across race, gender, and geographic locale type in the United States.

The findings of this study indicate that economic and spatial considerations are important factors in rural students' aspirations across the domains of college, career, and condition, and that economic and spatial considerations may be linked in students' minds. Both focal students' residential aspirations were strongly tied to their college and career aspirations. Further, the "*tension of staying or going*" (Means et al., 2016, p. 555) may be more tied to identity, community connection, and condition aspirations than previously believed. While this exploratory study has highlighted potential sociocultural influences on student postsecondary decision-making, more work on rural students' perceptions of opportunity, culture, and identity is needed to draw any generalised conclusions. Further, this study followed high school juniors, those in their penultimate year of high school. Student plans can change drastically between junior year and high school graduation. Work focused on high school seniors, or even recent high school graduates, may illuminate how student perceptions and thinking shift as students get closer to their adult lives.

## Conclusion

This narrative study explored how two rural students in the United States thought about the relationship between their home communities and socioeconomic success. Allen and Gabriella did not necessarily believe that leaving their home community would result in upward socioeconomic mobility. Rather, their decisions to leave or stay were influenced by a variety of sociocultural factors, such as identity, relationship to the local community, and perceptions of

higher education. Previous literature suggested that decisions to stay or leave home hinged on economic opportunities (see Cox et al., 2014; Parsons, 2022; Petrin et al., 2014). However, this study's findings suggest that, while economic opportunities are a factor, rural students' residential aspirations are more individualised and rooted in social, cultural, and familial contexts. When working with students on postsecondary planning, educators must consider each student's relationship to their home community, condition aspirations, beliefs and worldviews, and other information outside of educational and career aspirations as they guide students.

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## The Impact of Parent Migration on Education Expenditures for Children in Rural China

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### Abstract

More than 200 million residents of rural China migrate to urban destinations for work, but due to restrictions on household registration (the hukou system), these migrations are often cyclical and temporary. These patterns have resulted in a phenomenon in which rural children are left in the care of relatives while parents migrate for higher wages in urban labour markets. The impacts of this migration on children's outcomes are often ambiguous: while separation from parents is associated with a range of developmental and social challenges, the higher incomes that come from urban labour markets allow parents to send substantial remittance payments back to their primary household. We use panel data from the China Family Panel Studies (2010–2014) to test how parental migration affects (1) household education expenditure and (2) saving for future education. Left behind children are poorer and experience smaller increases in education spending than peers with co-resident parents. At the same time, households with a migrating parent are modestly more likely to start saving for education. These results, robust to propensity score matching, suggest migration changes expectations more than near-term expenditures.

**Keywords:** *development, labour migration, educational attainment, stratification, China, left behind children*

### Introduction

Despite becoming a majority-urban country in 2012, China remains home to hundreds of millions of rural families (Wei, 2019). In transitioning economies, significant disparities exist in social service provision between rural and urban communities that impact life outcomes for children who are raised in rural contexts (Nworgu & Nworgu, 2013). Education in China is particularly unequal across spatial dimensions, as many rural communities in China cannot provide the same level of instruction or extra-curricular opportunities as in the country's rapidly growing cities (Zhang, 2017). However, formal restrictions on internal migration preclude rural families from simply moving to the city in search of better labour markets and better schools (Wu, 2024). Instead, an increasing number of young parents choose to move to urban labour markets on a temporary basis, leaving their children in the care of relatives.

The structure of rural education outcomes in China remains an important subject for scholars of international rural education (Roberts & Hannum, 2018). This is particularly true for so-called 'left behind children', or the children who remain in rural communities when their parents migrate for work on a temporary basis. The consequences of parental out-migration have considerable

importance for scholars of rural education; labour migration is a common income maximising strategy for young adults in developing or middle-income countries, yet the incentives for labour migration are in tension with children's needs for residential stability and consistent education. Thus, documenting the consequences of parent migration on left behind children remains a crucial concern for scholars of rural education. We address this gap, highlighting one of the largest populations of rural students in the world and their relationship to developing labour markets. This article explores how internal migration decisions of parents impact investments and planning related to children who are left behind in rural contexts, typically in the care of extended family. The article considers two related research questions: How does a parent's decision to migrate to an urban context for work influence expenditures on children's education, and how do those decisions shape long term planning for education?

The article proceeds with a review of relevant literature that provides motivation for the research questions described here. A discussion of methods and data follows, then we present our primary findings. Using data from the China Family Panel Study (2010-2014), our analysis suggests that parents' migration decisions lead to a paradoxical pair of outcomes: families with a migrating parent spend less on their children's education, but are more likely to begin saving for larger, future education expenditure. These findings are robust to the use of propensity score matching methods that limit the analysis to households that are similar on observable characteristics. A concluding section includes implications for future research on migration, space, and education in rural contexts.

## **Literature Review**

### ***Internal Migration in China***

China is home to the world's largest internal migrations, largely due to the needs of urbanising economies combined with the incentive structure created by the hukou system, a system of household registration that ties people to their birthplaces. A history of the modern household registration system by Liang and White (1996) outlines the broad contours of the hukou system and its impacts on internal migration. Categories of hukou are divided into agricultural (rural) and non-agricultural (urban) and are associated with differential access to state social services and economic opportunities. Notably, children are only entitled to free public education and other basic services where they are registered. Changing a hukou status is difficult; graduating college and obtaining a job offer is the most direct way to convert an agricultural hukou to an urban hukou. Despite these official restrictions, China's government (at both the provincial and national level) has adopted varying degrees of forbearance toward adults seeking to move for work, and significant internal migration has been observed throughout recent Chinese history, particularly in the post-reform periods of the 1980s (Liang & White, 1996). Adults with an agricultural hukou have limited options to permanently move into an urban area and seek mainstream employment, but many are able to work in manufacturing or construction in these areas. Chan (2010) notes that this migration is typically temporary and cyclical, as adults return home each year during holidays and often expect to permanently return home after gaining experience and saving for future family expenses. The adults who participate in this process are often referred to as the 'floating population' (Chan, 2010). Research by Chang (2009) details the internal migration trajectories of young Chinese adults in the years after China entered the World Trade Organization and became more integrated with the global economy. Young women would leave for work in factories in coastal provinces, while young men would seek construction work in the country's rapidly growing cities. After years of seasonal migration, these adults might settle in their home communities with the benefit of new skills and saved income (Chang, 2009).

The number of individuals who were not officially registered in their current place of residence, the floating population, was 140 million in 2003, 221 million by 2010 (Liang et al., 2014), and 370

million by 2020, representing 26% of the population of China (Cao et al., 2024). Most of these individuals were labourers from rural areas in China's interior who relocated to cities and coastal areas. Despite the formal restrictions imposed by the hukou system, the Chinese government has taken a more encouraging stance on rural-urban migration in recent years and has implemented several measures to help rural residents who migrate to cities. Huang and Zhan (2005) explored the connection between migration, development, and reducing poverty. Their analysis demonstrated that many local governments in sending regions, particularly in the western regions Sichuan, Gansu, and Chongqing, view labour migration as one of the key tactics for fostering economic growth. Furthermore, since the late 1990s, labour migration has been embraced as a national strategy to lessen poverty in rural areas (Huang & Zhan, 2005).

Migrant workers' remittances, particularly those from the poorest families, have fostered local development and reduced poverty in migrant-sending areas. Remittances help poor families overcome poverty and contribute to lower spatial inequality within China (Pan & Sun, 2024). Research by Yu B. et al. (2023) demonstrates that labour migrants with a broader range of experiences and enhanced human capital can contribute positively to the socio-economic development of the sending areas. Many migrants who established their own businesses in Anhui Province, a primary sending place for mass migration since the early 1980s, have returned (Yu B. et al., 2023). Furthermore, after returning to their home villages, several migrant workers went on to assume leadership roles in their communities. The process of local development may benefit greatly from the contributions of these new leaders (Yu B. et al., 2023). However, other research demonstrates that internal migrants struggle to benefit from the agglomeration of human capital in urban contexts because of continued restrictions imposed by the hukou system (Yu L. et al., 2017).

Since the early 1980s, internal migration has increased consistently, largely through informal movements associated with cyclical labour migration. Formal movements, however, entail a hukou change. Movements across city, town, or township limits, are subject to tight regulations and need permission from the public security authorities (Cao et al., 2024). There is considerable spatial heterogeneity in internal migration patterns, both across and within provinces. Migration decisions can be sensitive to local level investments in infrastructure (Parsons, 2022) or can be shaped by province-level development strategies that may, to varying degrees, incentivise rural development or rural-to-urban migration (Donaldson, 2011).

### ***Left Behind Children and Internal Migration***

The process of internal migration described in the previous section typically involves adults leaving their children in the care of other family members. The impacts of labour migration on left-behind child outcomes are key to analysing the incentive structure leading to those migrations. While a neoclassical analysis of labour migration would be primarily concerned with the individual migrant's income maximisation potential, alternative frameworks account for broader household dynamics. The new economics of labour migration framework described by Stark and Bloom (1985) conceptualises migration decisions as household risk-minimisation strategies, rather than solely focusing on income. This framework considers reducing the risk of economic fluctuations, improving the social status of family members, accounting for market frictions, and other non-income-based variables. In this framework, a parent's decision to migrate could be motivated by a desire to improve outcomes for the child generation, irrespective of the immediate consequences for the individual parent's income (Stark & Bloom, 1985).

Parents participating in China's rural-to-urban cyclical migrations often leave dependent children behind due to aspects of China's social welfare system described by Kan (2013). Municipal governments, through the hukou system, restrict rural migrants and their children from accessing urban housing, healthcare, social security, and education. Additionally, disparities in educational curricula across administrative districts mean that children moving across provinces

face challenges, such as being required to take entrance exams for senior high school and university in their registered province (Kan, 2013). Zhou et al. (2014) examined the impact of parental migration on left behind children in Anhui and Jiangxi provinces. Their findings revealed that while the migration of one parent did not significantly affect children's math and Chinese exam scores, the absence of both parents led to lower scores.

Over 60 million rural children were classified as left behind in 2013, more than double the number from 2005, growth which highlights the long-term implications of rural labour migration and the importance of studying left behind children (Pan & Ye 2017). Pan and Ye (2017) also highlight the challenges faced by left behind children, including lower state investments in rural education and discrimination against economically disadvantaged children. Zhou et al. (2019) argue that rural education in China suffers from insufficient funding and uneven resource distribution, further exacerbated by urban-centric planning. Their work suggests administrative policies have concentrated educational resources in urban areas, marginalising rural communities. As a result, rural families must invest significant financial and human resources in their children's education, often forcing students to leave their villages at a young age to enrol in residential high schools, most of which charge tuition. For left behind children, this separation compounds the challenges of adjusting to an urban-oriented educational system, leading many to abandon their studies or enter the workforce prematurely without adequate preparation (Zhou et al., 2019).

The adverse effects of parental migration on left behind children extend beyond education. Tian et al. (2017) compare the growth of left behind children with non-left behind children, finding that left behind children, particularly in households where the mother out-migrates, had lower body mass indices and slower growth rates. Nutritional deficiencies contributed to poorer physical development outcomes for left behind children compared to their peers. Financial barriers further exacerbate the challenges faced by left behind children. The Law of Compulsory Education mandates nine years of schooling for all children, but universal education does not fully alleviate the financial burden on families (Huang et al., 2021). China's decentralised education funding system requires sub-national governments to cover approximately 95% of public education costs (Huang et al., 2021). Migrant parents who bring their children to urban areas face higher education expenses, including fees associated with private schools. Since school funding does not follow migration, migrant children are often subject to additional penalties. These financial pressures compel many parents to leave their children in rural areas (Zhang et al., 2021).

China's internal migration patterns provide a unique context for studying the impacts of parental migration on left behind children. With rapid growth in labour migration, the phenomenon of left behind children is closely tied to institutional policies. Lu and Pang (2022) investigated the effects of parental migration on educational investment for left behind children, finding that families with migrant parents spent less on extracurricular education expenses compared to non-migrant families. Analyses revealed that parental migration significantly reduced investments in supplemental education and negatively affected school preferences and funding. Additionally, the increased income from migration raised the opportunity cost of education, leading parents to undervalue educational spending (Lu & Pang, 2022).

### ***Educational Attainment in Contemporary China***

As in any national context, educational attainment in China is shaped by the socioeconomic status of students and local institutional factors. China is marked by significant spatial variation between rural and urban contexts, particularly since liberalisation and other economic reforms began in 1978 (Xie & Zhou, 2014). Rural families have long been disadvantaged in terms of education, occupational status and labour market opportunities, household incomes, housing, and other measures of well-being (Treiman, 2013). These disadvantages are further compounded

by intersections with other marginalised identities, such as ethnicity (Clothey et al., 2018), language spoken at home (Ma et al., 2018), and gender (Hannum, 2005).

Although the country has reduced spatial inequalities in Gross Domestic Product, the gap in educational attainment—particularly in higher education—remains stark (Wu, 2024). While China's rapidly expanding economy has earned it the moniker 'the world's factory', firms in the industrial sector struggle to attract low-skilled labour. Fu and Gabriel (2012) note that a growing number of highly educated individuals, including college graduates, face extended periods of unemployment. This challenge is especially pronounced for graduates from rural areas. Despite aspiring to secure high-paying jobs in urban centres, these individuals often find their skill levels and educational experiences insufficient to compete effectively. As a result, many return to rural regions, where they accept lower-paying positions that match their qualifications (Fu & Gabriel, 2012).

Rural students in China face unique barriers to higher education. They encounter more institutional obstacles compared to their urban peers and are more likely to seek positions within lower-paying sectors of the economy (Kan, 2013, Zhang et al., 2021). Financial disparities also contribute to education inequality, as decentralised funding mechanisms result in lower overall education expenditure in poorer provinces. In the most severe cases, provincial education budgets are inadequate to cover compulsory education expenses (Roberts & Hannum, 2018).

The hukou system adds another layer of complexity to educational inequality in China. This system exacerbates disparities through its connection to family origins, geographic location, and selective mobility (Huang, 2020). The hukou system has been linked to lower levels of social mobility for rural students (Huang, 2020). Moreover, the conversion of hukou status from rural to urban areas remains highly selective, restricting upward mobility for rural populations (Wu, 2024). Wu's research highlights the stark differences in educational outcomes between urban and rural hukou holders. For example, individuals with urban hukou status receive an average of 10.3 years of education, whereas those with rural hukou status receive approximately six years. Transition rates between educational levels further illustrate this divide. Among urban hukou holders, 93% continue their education to junior high school after completing primary school, compared to only 78% of rural hukou holders. Similarly, 67% of urban hukou holders advance to academic senior high school after junior high, whereas the rate drops to 29.9% for their rural counterparts (Wu, 2024).

Geographic location within China's administrative hierarchy also plays a significant role in determining educational attainment. These disparities highlight the deep-rooted inequalities that persist in China's education system, despite the country's rapid economic growth and modernisation efforts (Zhang et al., 2015). Despite these barriers, rural students remain strongly incentivised to pursue education as returns on investments in higher education are often higher for rural students relative to their urban peers (Lin, 2018).

### ***Remittances and Education Spending in Developing Contexts***

The relationship between remittances and household education expenditures represents a critical component of understanding how migration shapes human capital investment in sending communities. Remittances—monetary transfers from migrants to their households of origin—constitute a significant source of external finance for families in developing economies.

Existing research examines how these monetary transfers affect educational spending, with empirical evidence pointing to generally positive, though context-dependent, impacts. Meta-analytic evidence provides strong confirmation of the remittance-education relationship. Askarova and Doucouliagos (2020) synthesise results from 73 studies covering 30 countries, finding that international remittances increase household education expenditure by approximately 35% on average after adjusting for selection bias and reverse causality. They report

particularly pronounced effects in Latin America, where remittances are associated with education spending increases as high as 53%. However, their analysis suggests that domestic remittances generate smaller effects relative to international transfers. If this pattern holds for China, then the impacts of remittances for internal migration contexts like China are likely lower than what we might expect for international migration contexts.

Country-specific analyses largely confirm these patterns in education spending while highlighting context-specific sources of heterogeneity. Thapa and Acharya (2017) demonstrate that in Nepal, remittance-receiving households allocate a larger portion of their budget to education compared to non-recipients, consistent with the hypothesis that remittances relax constraints on discretionary household spending. Similarly, Bansak et al. (2015) report that remittances lead to higher education spending in Nepal, with impacts correlated with higher school quality. Cross-national evidence from Sezgin et al. (2023) suggests that remittances represent a meaningful determinant of educational attainment in emerging markets, though effect sizes remain modest compared to other structural factors.

The impact of remittances on education spending is not uniform across contexts. Démurger and Wang (2016) find that in rural China, internal remittances may reduce education expenditures, as households channel funds toward consumption and housing (this article we use newer data covering a broad portion of China to suggest that remittances lead to ambiguous impacts on education spending). Wang et al. (2021) observe limited influence of remittances on education budget shares in Kyrgyzstan, suggesting households treat these transfers as permanent income, leading to proportional spending increases across budget categories rather than targeted educational investment. The source of remittances—whether international or internal—also shapes educational outcomes.

Several studies emphasise the importance of intra-household dynamics. Using evidence from Ghana, Pickbourn (2016) demonstrated that remittances sent to women were more than twice as likely to be spent on education compared to those sent to men, underscoring that gendered patterns in household resource allocation extend to remittance spending. This finding aligns with broader evidence identifying gendered patterns when making household budget decisions related to surplus income (López-Feldman & Escalona 2016; Pickbourn 2016; Urbina 2020). In summary, the remittance literature suggests that these transfers can play a substantial role in increasing household education spending and improving enrolment rates, particularly when alleviating other constraints. However, the magnitude and direction of effects vary based on the origin of remittances, local returns to schooling, household decision-making dynamics, and the broader policy environment. The impact of remittances from internal migration are particularly understudied.

### **Research Questions**

The literature surveyed here suggests that parents in contemporary China must balance the incentive to participate in labour migration, restrictions on their children's movement, and the tension between the material needs of their children and their caregiving roles as parents. Insights from this review of the literature underpin two research questions:

*RQ1: How does a parent's out-migration impact the family's spending on a child's education?*

Because labour migration is an income-maximising strategy, we might expect that these households would see an increase in education spending; as disposable income increases, these households have more capacity to invest in education through tuition as well as extracurricular opportunities. However, labour migration also (by definition) separates the parent from the child. The distance between family members may influence household spending priorities. Labour migration may also result in new perspectives on the utility of voluntary education

spending. For example, parents with success as labour migrants in urban industries may be more confident that the same economic opportunities will be available to their children, irrespective of educational attainment.

*RQ2: How does a parent's out-migration impact the family's planning for a child's future education?*

The first research question considers actual spending; the second accounts for future-oriented decision making. While out-migration may or may not result in measurable changes to present education spending, it may influence decisions to save for future expenses. One possibility is that families may value the symbolic importance of savings, even if present spending on education remains largely the same. However, migration may also incentivise families to spend on present-needs such as paying down debt, investing in household needs, and other large expenses that may preclude saving.

### Methods and Data

This article leveraged panel data from the China Family Panel Studies (CFPS) administered by Peking University. The CFPS is a representative sample of families from most provinces of mainland China (the Special Administrative Regions of Hong Kong and Macau, Taiwan, and some provinces in western China are excluded). We used data from the 2010, 2012, and 2014 waves of the survey. There are separate survey modules for community-level features, adults, children, and family rosters. The data include approximately 15,000 unique families in the first wave with survey responses related to nearly 9,000 unique children. For a complete discussion of the CFPS, see Xie and Hu (2014). Because this article used already-collected secondary data it was deemed low risk research by the authors' institution ethics board.

Background characteristics about the child and their family (e.g., ethnicity) are reported in Wave 1. The treatment variable (i.e., whether a parent migrated for work) is measured in Wave 2. The outcome variables are measured in Wave 3. We selected these three waves because they allow for a clear chronological sequence: time-invariant background and baseline covariates (Wave 1), treatment (parental migration, Wave 2), and outcomes (education expenditures or saving, Wave 3). This sequencing ensures that the treatment temporally precedes the outcome.

The outcomes of interest in this article relate to investment in children's education and the associations between parents' migration decisions and those investments. Migration decisions are not random, making formal causal inference impossible. Many factors that shape an adult's decision to migrate for work may also influence decisions around a child's education. We leveraged several techniques to address potential confounders and other sources of bias. Our primary analytic strategy relied on propensity score matching (PSM), a method to create a subset of the data in which observations that receive the treatment (in this case, having a parent migrate for work) are matched with observations that do not receive this treatment yet are otherwise similar (Caliendo & Kopeinig, 2008). PSM is a useful tool for dimension reduction and helps avoid overfitting compared to other matching techniques. Propensity scores are the predicted probabilities that an observation receives the treatment in question and are typically calculated as the output of a logistic regression in which the treatment is the dependent variable. We used the nearest-neighbour matching method in the MatchIt R package (Ho et al., 2011). In practical terms, this meant that for each child with a parent who migrated, we identified a child who looked similar on key background characteristics (such as parental education and household income) but whose parent did not migrate. This created two groups that were more directly comparable.

Computing propensity scores in this way required choosing a set of covariates that may predict the treatment. We used Least Absolute Shrinkage and Selection Operator (LASSO) regression as a strategy to choose these covariates from the adult datasets in the CFPS. LASSO is a

regularisation technique that reduces the dimensionality of a dataset by selecting only the features that are most predictive of the outcome in question (Ranstam & Cook, 2018). This strategy allowed us to avoid overfitting when calculating propensity scores and reduced the potential bias caused by relying on researcher discretion when choosing these features. We selected eight features (from an initial set of 372 covariates in the adult dataset of Wave 1) for the PSM model to predict likelihood of treatment. In this case, the features identified by the LASSO procedure largely aligned with theoretical expectations about what motivates migration decisions (e.g., parent level of education and child's age). Leveraging the LASSO algorithm provided further support for researcher intuition about what features were appropriate for using PSM. Running the PSM model with these features returned a matched dataset with 833 observations (contrasted with 2,831 complete rural observations in the full data set), of which 776 were complete cases without missing data for relevant control variables. While formal causal inference was still not possible with these data, focusing on this set of matched observations reduced the influence of confounders.

Our first set of models were ordinary least squares (OLS) linear regressions in which the outcome was the total spending on a child's education in 2014. A second set of models were linear probability models in which the outcome was a binary variable indicating whether a child's family had started saving for future education expenses. The key independent variable was a binary variable reporting whether one of the child's parents migrated for work between the 2010 and 2012 waves of the CFPS (i.e., Waves 1 and 2). This variable was measured in the Wave 2 survey data. We controlled for a range of variables associated with both the child and their parents as well as province-level fixed effects. We also included a lagged dependent variable (the amount of education expenditure reported in Wave 1). Inclusion of this lagged variable, combined with the use of propensity score matching, addressed potential bias resulting from the fact that parents who migrate were fundamentally different from those who do not. While there are more recent data in the CFPS, education spending is not measured as consistently. Many of the children observed in Waves 1 through 3 of the survey had 'aged out' of their education trajectories by later waves. As a result, inclusion of these later data risks attenuating the relationship because of the relatively large number of situations in which education spending drops to 0 due to graduation.

Table 1 includes descriptive statistics for these variables in both the full and matched samples. The 'Full Data' section reports descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation, and minimum and maximum values) from the 2,831 complete observations in the full sample (cases with missing data are excluded). Approximately 14% of children in the full sample had a parent who migrated for work between Wave 1 and Wave 2 of the survey. A slight majority (54%) of focal children (i.e., the children about whom the survey was completed) were male, and 12% belonged to one of China's 55 recognised ethnic minority groups. A large majority (85%) have an 'agricultural hukou', which means they were registered in a rural area at birth. This value is less than 100% because the sample includes a small number of children who are registered in suburban, exurban, or urban locales. However, all children included in the models below lived in a rural village at the time of the survey.

The latter portion of Table 1, labelled 'Matched Data', reports descriptive statistics for the sample of children who were matched with observably similar respondents using propensity score matching. There were 776 complete cases in the matched sample. Half (.50) of the observations in the smaller matched sample had parents who migrated. This 50-50 split between treated and untreated observations is a result of the matching process; for each child exposed to the treatment (parental migration), a non-treated child with similar background covariates is included.

**Table 1: Descriptive Statistics, Full and Matched Data**

| Variable                                           | Full Data (n = 2,831) |           |     |         | Matched Data (n = 776) |           |     |         |
|----------------------------------------------------|-----------------------|-----------|-----|---------|------------------------|-----------|-----|---------|
|                                                    | Mean                  | SD        | Min | Max     | Mean                   | SD        | Min | Max     |
| <b>Total Education Expenditure in Wave 3 (RMB)</b> | 3,446.63              | 5,348.91  | 0   | 100,800 | 2,486.86               | 3,585.49  | 0   | 39,500  |
| <b>Started Saving?</b>                             | 0.13                  | -         | 0   | 1       | 0.12                   | -         | 0   | 1       |
| <b>Parent Migrated (1 = Yes)</b>                   | 0.14                  | -         | 0   | 1       | 0.50                   | -         | 0   | 1       |
| <b>Sex (1 = M)</b>                                 | 0.54                  | -         | 0   | 1       | 0.53                   | -         | 0   | 1       |
| <b>Age of Child in 2010</b>                        | 5.59                  | 3.40      | 0   | 12      | 5.15                   | 3.42      | 0   | 12      |
| <b>Rural Household</b>                             | 0.85                  | -         | 0   | 1       | 0.95                   | -         | 0   | 1       |
| <b>Minority (1 = non-Han)</b>                      | 0.12                  | -         | 0   | 1       | 0.12                   | -         | 0   | 1       |
| <b>Highest Parental Education Level</b>            | 3.02                  | 1.17      | 0   | 8       | 2.76                   | 0.96      | 1   | 6       |
| <b>Mother's Marital Status</b>                     | 2.02                  | 0.24      | 2   | 5       | 2.02                   | 0.22      | 2   | 5       |
| <b>Household Income in 2010</b>                    | 22,296.91             | 30,163.94 | 0   | 800,000 | 15,138.85              | 14,989.19 | 0   | 100,000 |
| <b>Education Spending, Wave 1</b>                  | 920.04                | 2,225.41  | 0   | 50,500  | 482.37                 | 955.91    | 0   | 11,000  |

Table 2 reports the means for the covariates in the treated and untreated groups of the smaller matched sample; this balance table suggests that the matching algorithm returned comparable groups of children with and without a parental migration experience.

**Table 2: Balance Table for PSM Output**

| Variable                                | Treated   | Untreated |
|-----------------------------------------|-----------|-----------|
|                                         | Mean      | Mean      |
| <b>Sex (1 = M)</b>                      | 0.55      | 0.52      |
| <b>Age of Child in 2010</b>             | 4.67      | 5.45      |
| <b>Rural Household</b>                  | 0.82      | 0.81      |
| <b>Minority (1 = non-Han)</b>           | 0.13      | 0.12      |
| <b>Highest Parental Education Level</b> | 2.78      | 2.78      |
| <b>Mother's Marital Status</b>          | 2.00      | 2.02      |
| <b>Household Income in 2010</b>         | 15,280.75 | 15,199.23 |
| <b>Education Spending, Wave 1</b>       | 554.00    | 448.00    |

We report findings from two sets of regression models in Tables 3 and 4. The first is a measure of change in education spending. The ordinary least squares (OLS) model specification for the models without fixed effects is reported in Equation 1:

$$(1) Y_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 Moved_i + \beta_2 Z_i + \epsilon_i$$

where  $Y_i$  corresponds to the outcome of interest for child  $i$  (i.e., education spending),  $\beta_0$  represents an intercept,  $Moved_i$  is a binary variable indicating whether or not child  $i$ 's parent moved,  $Z_i$  is a vector of control variables measured for child  $i$  (including the lagged dependent

variable), and  $\epsilon_i$  is an error term. The coefficient  $\beta_1$  represents the association between a parent's moving and changes in education spending. The term  $\beta_2$  represents a vector of coefficients relating control variables to the outcome. As noted above,  $Y_i$  is measured in Wave 3,  $Moved_i$  is measured in Wave 2, and the control variables in vector  $Z_i$  in Wave 1. For the province fixed effect models, the specification is:

$$(2) Y_{ip} = \delta_0 + \delta_1 Moved_i + \delta_2 Z_i + \alpha_p + \epsilon_{ip}$$

where the subscript  $p$  represents within-province measurements and the term  $\alpha_p$  denotes province-level fixed effects, capturing all time-invariant differences across provinces. The coefficients in equations (2), (3), and (4) are represented with  $\delta$ ,  $\theta$ , and  $\varphi$ , respectively, to highlight that they will vary across specifications.

The second outcome, represented below as  $S_i$ , is a binary variable indicating whether a family has begun saving for a child's education (in province  $p$  for fixed effects models). We estimate these models as linear probability models with specifications similar to models 1 and 2. The model without fixed effects is:

$$(3) S_i = \theta_0 + \theta_1 Moved_i + \beta_2 Z_i + \epsilon_i$$

and the corresponding fixed effects model is:

$$(4) S_{ip} = \varphi_0 + \varphi_1 Moved_i + \varphi_2 Z_i + \alpha_p + \epsilon_{ip}$$

Here, the terms  $Moved_i$ ,  $Z_i$ , and  $\alpha_p$  represent the same variables as in Equations 1 and 2.

## Results

Table 3 reports the results corresponding to Equations 1 and 2. The outcome variable is the amount of total education expenditures for the focal child as reported in the third wave of the survey. The model names at the top of the table indicate (a) whether the model uses the full or matched sample and (b) whether province-level fixed effects are included. Model 1 provides the bivariate association between parental migration and education spending. Model 2 adds child and family background controls, which allowed us to isolate whether the migration effect persisted once these factors were accounted for. Model 3 then adds province fixed effects, capturing unobserved regional differences. By comparing results across these models, we can assess whether the association is robust to increasingly stringent controls.

Model 1 suggests that in situations where a parent out-migrates, families spend around 1,500 RMB<sup>1</sup> less per year on the child's education. Model 2 introduces a range of control variables that may separately influence education spending: the sex of the child, their age, whether the child has an agricultural (rural) hukou, whether the child is a member of a recognised ethnic minority group, the highest level of education attained by the child's parents, the mother's marital status in Wave 1 of the survey, and the total household income in Wave 1.

In this model, the coefficient of -500 indicated that, on average, children in families where a parent migrated had education expenditures about 500 RMB lower than otherwise comparable children. To put this in context, this represents roughly 15% of the sample's mean education spending. Model 3 introduced province-level fixed effects. The main coefficient of interest was not statistically significant in this model, suggesting that spatial variation at the province level plays an important role in the overall trends. However, the  $R^2$  value (a measure of how much variation in the outcome can be explained by the independent variables) for this model is much lower than Model 2.

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<sup>1</sup> Renminbi (RMB), or Chinese yuan (CNY), is the currency of the People's Republic of China.

Models 4, 5, and 6 report results for similar regression models using the matched sample. The matched sample regressions returned similar results to the first three models. Despite the lack of statistical significance in some of the models in Table 3, the consistently negative direction of the coefficients suggest that parental out-migration does not increase investment in children's education.

In general, the coefficients in Table 3 suggest widespread disadvantage for rural children (i.e., many of the factors we might associate with improved education outcomes like education spending are not statistically significant, meaning that the true direction of the association could be positive or negative). The pattern of results in the models in Table 3, particularly the models that leverage propensity score matching (models 4-6) provides tentative evidence that labour migration is not (in itself) a causal pathway to higher education investments. Non-statistically significant results in Models 5 and 6 are a further indication that parent migration does not meaningfully offset the disadvantage these children face.

**Table 3: Total Education Expenditure in Wave 3 for Full and Matched Sample**

|                                  | Total Education Expenditure in Wave 3 |                           |                          |                           |                         |                                |
|----------------------------------|---------------------------------------|---------------------------|--------------------------|---------------------------|-------------------------|--------------------------------|
|                                  | Bivariate – Full Sample               | Controls Added            | Controls + Fixed Effects | Binary - PSM              | Controls Added - PSM    | Controls + Fixed Effects - PSM |
| <b>Parent Migrated (1 = Yes)</b> | -1,521.987***<br>(285.360)            | -500.422*<br>(267.280)    | -121.861<br>(262.074)    | -534.005***<br>(247.997)  | -394.267<br>(250.342)   | -128.653<br>(246.453)          |
| <b>Sex (1 = Male)</b>            |                                       | -174.173<br>(174.720)     | -122.644<br>(167.842)    |                           | -86.514<br>(250.030)    | -18.917<br>(240.551)           |
| <b>Age of Child in 2010</b>      |                                       | 46.782<br>(28.499)        | 111.928***<br>(32.395)   |                           | 34.235<br>(41.404)      | 64.014<br>(39.874)             |
| <b>Rural Household</b>           |                                       | 490.869*<br>(269.081)     | -866.524***<br>(219.072) |                           | -13.845<br>(552.707)    | 4.084<br>(546.824)             |
| <b>Minority (1 = non-Han)</b>    |                                       | -385.473<br>(277.378)     | -436.156<br>(320.541)    |                           | -360.370<br>(391.421)   | 89.566<br>(475.194)            |
| <b>Highest Parent Education</b>  |                                       | 943.232***<br>(87.386)    | 669.832***<br>(85.911)   |                           | 732.190***<br>(140.622) | 568.628***<br>(142.001)        |
| <b>Mother's Marital Status</b>   |                                       | 480.712<br>(1,131.318)    | 11.297<br>(1,088.629)    |                           | -97.576<br>(532.097)    | -64.510<br>(511.911)           |
| <b>Household Income in 2010</b>  |                                       | 0.038***<br>(0.003)       | 0.034***<br>(0.003)      |                           | 0.033***<br>(0.009)     | 0.012<br>(0.009)               |
| <b>Ed. Spending, Wave 1</b>      |                                       | 0.594***<br>(0.043)       | 0.434***<br>(0.042)      |                           | 0.612***<br>(0.136)     | 0.447***<br>(0.133)            |
| <b>Intercept</b>                 | 3,735.117***<br>(103.387)             | -2,209.618<br>(2,328.618) |                          | 2,747.136***<br>(173.136) | 50.048<br>(1,367.905)   |                                |
| <b>Observations</b>              | 2,831                                 | 2,831                     | 2,831                    | 776                       | 776                     | 776                            |
| <b>R<sup>2</sup></b>             | 0.009                                 | 0.244                     | 0.157                    | 0.006                     | 0.120                   | 0.054                          |
| <b>Adjusted R<sup>2</sup></b>    | 0.009                                 | 0.242                     | 0.147                    | 0.004                     | 0.110                   | 0.013                          |

Note:  $p < .1^*$ ,  $p < .05^{**}$ ,  $p < .01^{***}$

Table 4 considers a different outcome variable (corresponding to Equations 3 and 4 above): whether the family has begun to save for a child's future education expenses by Wave 3 of the survey. We included results from matched sample models only in Table 4, as the matched samples better account for unobserved variables. The results for the full sample are substantively similar.

The models in Table 4 are linear probability models, which have the same general form as OLS regression. Each survey wave asked parents if they had begun to save for their child's education; a value of 1 for this variable indicates that a family was not saving for education expenses in Wave

1 of the survey but began saving by Wave 3. The coefficients correspond to percentage point increases in the likelihood that a given child's family had begun saving.

**Table 4: Family Saving for Future Education Expenses (Matched Sample)**

|                                  | Likelihood of Starting to Save for Education |                      |                                   |
|----------------------------------|----------------------------------------------|----------------------|-----------------------------------|
|                                  | Bivariate - PSM                              | Matched Sample       | Matched Sample with Fixed Effects |
| <b>Parent Migrated (1 = Yes)</b> | 0.043**<br>(0.022)                           | 0.043*<br>(0.022)    | 0.041*<br>(0.024)                 |
| <b>Sex (1 = Male)</b>            |                                              | -0.015<br>(0.022)    | -0.017<br>(0.023)                 |
| <b>Age of Child in 2010</b>      |                                              | -0.001<br>(0.003)    | -0.003<br>(0.004)                 |
| <b>Rural Household</b>           |                                              | -0.019<br>(0.049)    | -0.018<br>(0.052)                 |
| <b>Minority (1 = non-Han)</b>    |                                              | 0.035<br>(0.034)     | 0.052<br>(0.046)                  |
| <b>Highest Parent Education</b>  |                                              | -0.013<br>(0.012)    | -0.011<br>(0.014)                 |
| <b>Mother's Marital Status</b>   |                                              | -0.057<br>(0.049)    | -0.054<br>(0.050)                 |
| <b>Household Income in 2010</b>  |                                              | 0.00000<br>(0.00000) | 0.00000<br>(0.00000)              |
| <b>Ed. Spending, Wave 1</b>      |                                              | 0.00001<br>(0.00001) | 0.00001<br>(0.00001)              |
| <b>Intercept</b>                 | 0.095***<br>(0.015)                          | 0.263**<br>(0.114)   |                                   |
| <b>Observations</b>              | 776                                          | 776                  | 776                               |
| <b>R<sup>2</sup></b>             | 0.005                                        | 0.010                | 0.014                             |
| <b>Adjusted R<sup>2</sup></b>    | 0.003                                        | 0.001                | -0.027                            |

Note: p<.1\*, p<.05\*\*, p<.01\*\*\*

Model 1 of Table 4 reports the bivariate relationship; Model 2 introduces the same control variables as in Table 3 (the inclusion of child's age in 2010 accounts for potential cases in which a child was not yet old enough for parents to consider saving for education; that is, controlling for age avoids the possibility that a large number of infant children may attenuate observed savings patterns). The main coefficient of interest in Models 1 and 2 is identical after rounding; parental migration is associated with around a four percentage points increase in rates of education saving. Model 3 introduces province-level fixed effects. The coefficient of interest in Model 3 is very similar to Models 1 and 2, corresponding to a four percentage point increase in likelihood of education-related saving relative to similar families without a migrant parent.

The outcome variables considered in Table 3 and Table 4 differ in important ways. Actual education expenditures represent real investment in a child's education but are limited by present income constraints; that is, even if parents wish to increase spending on their children's education, they cannot spend more than they have available.

However, saving for a child's education (even if only a nominal amount) reflects a belief in the value of education and optimism about the child's education trajectory. The findings in Table 4 thus suggest that parental out-migration is associated with higher expectations about a child's future education, even if present-day expenditures remain limited.

In a small number of households, both parents reported migrating during Wave 2. Separate models estimating the association between dual-parent migration and children's outcomes return largely comparable results, though several additional coefficients were not statistically significant because of sample size limitations. Household contexts in which two adults out-migrate are likely to be different from single-migrant households in important ways; future research should investigate these situations, though the results discussed here suggest that the short-term disadvantage facing these children is comparable to their peers.

Other results in Tables 3 and 4 highlight expected relationships between migration and education investment. Model 6 in Table 3, for example, demonstrates the intuitive finding that education spending is positively associated with parents' levels of education and prior levels of education spending. Equally noteworthy are the null associations with ethnicity, rurality, and sex. Despite the documented disadvantages discussed above for non-Han minority children, girls, and rural children (e.g., Hannum 2005; Clothey et al. 2018; Lin 2018; Ma et al. 2018), none of these coefficients achieve conventional levels of statistical significance. One possibility for this finding is that the measured impacts of minoritised status (e.g., being an ethnic minority child in a rural village) are subsumed within the larger impacts of labour migration and province-level fixed effects (e.g., province-level policies that impact minoritised groups might be captured in the fixed effect estimation).

Similar interpretations can be applied to Table 4; parental migration is the only predictor associated with a change in savings behaviour. However, the  $R^2$  value for the models in Table 4 is much lower than the corresponding values in Table 3. The results related to changes in savings behaviour should be treated as suggestive and less definitive than our findings related to education spending.

In summary, our findings about the relationship between labour migration and education investment in rural China are ambiguous at best. Families in which a parent migrates for work saw lower rates of education spending on children compared to families without an out-migrating parent, even when restricting the overall sample to observably similar families. Families with an out-migrating parent had slightly higher rates of new saving for future education expenses, but these models' explanatory power is much lower, suggesting that migration is not the most meaningful driver of variation in savings behaviour. While labour migration has important economic benefits for rural-origin families in China, it does not appear to be sufficient to ameliorate differences in household education spending among rural families.

## Discussion and Conclusion

Millions of parents in rural China migrate to urban economies each year as part of an effort to boost family income and acquire transferable skills. The nuances of China's household registration policies incentivise many parents to leave their children in the care of extended family in rural hometowns. The data analysed in this article suggest that labour migration does not have a measurable impact on how much the family spends on the child's education in the time period captured in these survey waves. However, households with an out-migrating parent

are marginally more likely to begin saving for future education expenses, suggesting that outmigration may have longer-term impacts that are not observable with existing data.

Our analysis vis-à-vis Research Question 1 (How does a parent's out-migration impact the family's spending on a child's education?) finds that parental outmigration is associated with lower spending or no impact on educational spending, even after restricting analysis to observably similar families. This supports earlier research by Démurger and Wang (2016) in the Chinese context that internal migration may not increase education spending. Our findings also align with broader patterns observed by Askarov and Doucouliagos (2020) that remittance payments from internal migration more generally do not lead to higher human capital investments. Regarding Research Question 2 (How does a parent's out-migration impact the family's planning for a child's future education?) we find evidence that migrating parents are more likely to plan for future education expenses.

These findings are robust for inclusion of standard control variables and propensity score matching that confines the analysis to observably similar families. The apparent tension between these two findings reflects the difference in present day needs and future expectations. Opportunities for extra education spending (tutoring, afterschool programming, at-home study materials) are both more common and more discretionary. A rural family who expects their child to enter the same occupation as their parents may not choose to set aside disposable income for more than the necessary education expenses. By contrast, a family that has different expectations for a child's future may be prone towards saving. Labour migration has a considerable impact on an adult's social context and understanding of social institutions and opportunities. Thus, while labour migration may not provide enough surplus income for substantial changes in present day education spending, exposure to new ways of living and new occupations does potentially increase savings rates. In the Chinese context, these results suggest that internal migration may offset some of the ambivalence about education imposed by the hukou system (Huang 2020; Kan, 2013), even if the immediate impacts are minimal.

These results suggest several important insights for policymakers. While education spending at the household level may not be a major driver of educational inequality in countries with robust, publicly funded education, in transitioning economic contexts (such as rural China), supplementary and extracurricular spending may narrow gaps between rural and urban students. The findings related to education savings also point to important policy and practice implications; while year-to-year education spending may not be a significant concern for socioeconomically disadvantaged families, the positive association with saving for future education spending suggests that labour migration may induce long-term thinking and planning about education. Because compulsory and free education in China is less robust at the secondary level, this change in savings patterns highlights longer-term concerns for poor families. The preference for savings, rather than an increase in yearly spending, may reflect a desire to ensure children can enrol in secondary schools and post-secondary education.

Additional research should investigate the nuances of spatial variation. The role of provincial fixed effects in attenuating our results suggests that negative outcomes are particularly strong within a select few provinces. Province-level policies and other political economic considerations may help explain these patterns and highlight the political decisions that contribute to negative outcomes for left behind children. This finding aligns with existing research that identifies spatial heterogeneity in China's social services (Cao et al., 2024).

Analysis of rural China provides insights into more generalisable mechanisms, particularly rapid urbanisation and development as well as their interaction with status attainment and mobility processes (Roberts & Hannum, 2018). Our central contributions are to understandings of the relationship between spatial context, labour dynamics, and attitudes towards education. Labour migration provides parents with a broader social horizon, greater information about education

and occupations, and increased household incomes. While the income gains associated with labour migration may not have an obvious impact on education spending in the present, labour migration does increase planning for a child's future. Future research should explore how labour migration as a process shapes these attitudes, particularly given the cyclical nature of internal migration in China; as parents return to their hometowns with expanded horizons and new endowments of social and cultural capital, they also reshape collective expectations about the futures possible for their children.

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## Teachers on the Move: Examining Rural Teachers' Reasons for Leaving and Different Patterns of Teacher Mobility

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### Abstract

Teacher shortages are a worldwide concern and may disproportionately affect rural schools. Teacher mobility is an important but under-studied factor in these shortages. Understanding teachers' reasons for different mobility decisions (leaving the profession; moving to another school) can inform policies to increase retention. This project used a subset of rural teacher data from a statewide exit survey collected from educators in South Carolina, a racially diverse state in the southeastern United States, who left their positions at the end of the 2023-24 school year. The survey, which was developed by the research team in association with a state-funded research consortium, allowed exiting teachers to indicate the relative importance of different factors driving their mobility choices, including personal reasons, job resources, job demands, and policy reasons. A multivariate multiple regression revealed that teachers working in rural distant schools placed lower importance on job demands and policy reasons for exiting than teachers in rural fringe schools. A logistic regression model analysis revealed that differences in teachers' perceptions of job resources, job demands, and personal reasons were statistically significantly related with different mobility choices, and that job demands were most strongly associated with leaving the profession completely. Ultimately, the findings from this study may highlight community assets that rural schools can leverage to retain teachers more effectively in the future.

**Keywords:** *rural education, teacher mobility, teacher retention, Job Demands-Resources model, teacher working conditions*

### Introduction

Teachers play critical roles in the lives of their students and society as a whole. They foster their students' curiosity and creativity and help them become informed and productive citizens. Teacher-student relationships are the core of the educational experience for students, and these relationships may be particularly important for students in rural contexts (Huang et al., 2022). Rural schools can also serve vital roles in uniting and even reenergizing their communities

(Schafft, 2016). However, teacher attrition can jeopardize the positive roles that rural schools play.

Teacher turnover and shortages are worldwide concerns (Slanda & Lachlan-Haché, 2023; UNESCO, 2024), and they disproportionately affect rural schools (Biddle & Azano, 2016). Rural communities have many assets, including strong senses of kinship and place (Barter, 2008). However, the geographic remoteness of rural schools complicates teacher recruitment as educators tend to choose jobs closer to their hometowns or their preparatory programs (Edwards et al., 2024; Goldhaber et al., 2021). Therefore, rural schools in communities with smaller populations typically have fewer individuals to draw on to fill teaching positions. This recruitment challenge makes teacher retention an even more important priority for rural schools.

Studies have revealed common concerns across rural schools in different countries (e.g., distance to schools, teaching methods ill-suited to context; Çiftçi & Cin, 2018), but it is critical to recognize that rural contexts can also vary significantly (Seelig & McCabe, 2021). Rural communities differ notably from nation to nation, partly because of the various ways rurality is defined. Regulations and policies governing rural education also vary dramatically between countries (EduRural, 2019).

Even within the United States, rural communities have significant differences based on local context. Western states, like Montana and North Dakota, tend to have geographically large, remote rural districts with small student populations, whereas eastern states, such as South Carolina and Florida, primarily have geographically small, fringe rural districts with larger populations of students (National Center of Education Statistics [NCES], 2024b; Showalter et al., 2023). The demographics of rural communities in the United States are also heterogeneous, as southeastern communities are largely Black, pockets of the rural southwest are largely Latino, and various rural areas throughout the country have high percentages of Indigenous populations (Rowlands & Love, 2021). Additionally, economic conditions vary notably across rural areas in the United States (Ajilore & Willingham, 2019). These differences speak to the need to carefully consider local contexts when examining rural schools and phenomena like rural teacher retention (Williams et al., 2022).

School and teacher characteristics are also important to consider. Staffing issues tend to affect high-poverty rural schools more than their low-poverty counterparts (Ingersoll & Tran, 2023). Isolated rural schools might find recruiting or retaining novice teachers particularly difficult (Proffitt et al., 2004). School traits, such as size and remoteness, and teacher characteristics, like age and gender, are not the reasons most teachers leave their positions, but they may be differentially related to factors driving teachers to leave. For example, younger teachers may be more likely to leave their positions for personal reasons, such as starting a family.

Working conditions are a major driving force behind teachers leaving their positions in rural schools (Ingersoll & Tran, 2023). Researchers are increasingly considering how different working conditions relate to teacher attrition. However, relatively few studies examine how specific working conditions relate to different mobility choices.

This study aims to build a more nuanced understanding of teacher mobility patterns in rural school districts in South Carolina. First, we examine how teacher and school characteristics related to teachers' reasons for leaving their positions after the 2023-24 school year. Then we show how different reasons for leaving contributed to teachers' mobility choices. Studying such differences may reveal retention dynamics that rural districts can address more effectively through carefully tailored policies.

## Literature Review

### Teacher Mobility

Much of the research literature about the teacher workforce focuses on shortages and teacher turnover, with school vacancies serving as proxies for shortages (Nguyen et al., 2022). In the United States, though, limited or inconsistent data complicate any picture of teacher staffing challenges (McVey & Trinidad, 2019). Additionally, merely analysing unfilled positions does not reveal the important aspect of dynamics within the workforce.

Some scholars have instead investigated issues related to retention. These researchers have examined teacher and school characteristics related to educators' likelihood to stay in their positions. Studies have shown that the least experienced (or youngest) and most experienced (or oldest) teachers are the most likely to leave (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017). Other research has demonstrated that, at least in the United States, female teachers are more likely to leave or consider leaving their positions than male teachers, and elementary teachers leave at higher rates than secondary teachers (Borman & Dowling, 2008; Doan et al., 2023; Taie & Lewis, 2023). Scholars have also found that teachers are more likely to leave high-poverty and urban schools, and schools with lower-achieving students, than schools in other contexts (Djonko-Moore, 2016; Martin & Benedetti, 2025).

Much of this research does not distinguish between teachers moving to teach elsewhere and those leaving the profession entirely. From the vantage point of an individual school, this may not matter as the school is losing teachers. However, it is important to recognize the multi-faceted nature of teacher mobility because the mechanisms and forces that drive these movements are likely distinct and because different types of mobility affect the educational system in unique ways (Goldhaber et al., 2011; Vagi & Pivovarova, 2017).

Part of the problem in discussing teacher mobility is the inconsistency in the terminology used in the field. For instance, Taie and Lewis (2023) followed a long line of national American reports in distinguishing between attrition (leaving the profession) and mobility (moving to teach at different schools). In comparison, in their scoping review, Palma-Vasquez et al. (2022) distinguish between these phenomena but include both in the construct of teacher mobility. We agree with these latter authors that both groups of teachers make mobility choices. To stay aligned with the predominant terms used in the literature, we will use the terms *lateral movers* to designate teachers voluntarily moving to teach elsewhere and *leavers* to describe teachers choosing to leave the profession completely. However, since teachers are hired by districts in the United States, we limit *lateral movers* to teachers moving to a different district (interdistrict movement) rather than to another school in the same district (intradistrict movement).

### Teacher Mobility in Rural Contexts

Historically, studying teacher mobility in rural contexts has been challenging because of the smaller numbers of teachers in these schools. Consequently, most research on rural teacher workforces has either consisted of localized, qualitative case studies (e.g., Tran et al., 2020), or studies based on national-level data (e.g., Ingersoll & Tran, 2023). The former provide nuance because they are locally situated, but patterns may be difficult to detect. The latter may reveal these patterns, but the broader view likely obscures important contextual information.

Recently, though, scholars have increased their focus on turnover in rural schools. Rhinesmith et al. (2023) found 94 studies fitting their systematic review on rural teacher recruitment and retention in the United States. They concluded that much of the literature focuses on financial incentives, such as signing bonuses, housing allowances, and stipends for travel, which tend to be effective. Their synthesis also revealed that working conditions, such as colleague support and mentoring, can play large roles in teacher turnover in rural schools.

Rhinesmith et al. (2023) noted that research into rural teacher mobility, beyond turnover, has increased in recent years. These examinations have mainly focused on where rural teachers are likely to move, especially compared to teachers in other locales. For example, Miller (2012) found that rural New York teachers were more likely to transfer away from rural contexts than suburban or urban teachers from their respective locales. Hanushek et al. (2004), in comparison, found that rural teachers in Texas were more likely to stay in rural schools when moving. These opposing findings help illustrate the importance of local context, even within the rural United States.

Scholars have also investigated the characteristics of rural schools and teachers in different states and how they relate to mobility patterns locally. For example, Elfers and Plecki (2006) found that higher-poverty schools in Washington state had higher percentages of lateral movers than other contexts. However, the percentage of leavers did not vary across poverty levels. They did not find differences based on the degree of remoteness or isolation of rural schools in the state, with about 20% of teachers in both contexts exiting the profession completely and just under 10% moving to a school in a different district.

Elfers and Plecki (2006) also found that novice teachers were almost equally likely to move laterally (19.7%) or leave the profession (20.8%) if they worked in a small, rural district, whereas the overall teacher population in these schools was more likely to be leavers (19.3%) than lateral movers (10.2%). Other personal characteristics beyond years of experience also appear to influence mobility choices. For example, Williams et al. (2021) found that female teachers in rural schools in Georgia were more likely to remain in those schools than male teachers, whereas teachers with advanced degrees were more likely to exit than educators without them. More specifically, Williams et al. (2021) found that, in Georgia, Black rural teachers moved between districts almost twice as much as White rural teachers.

Scholars examining rural teacher mobility recognize, though, that such patterns “*are likely to bear the stamp of the particular conditions in that state*” (Elfers et al., 2006, p. 124). Additionally, studies have shown that personal reasons and organizational conditions can play important roles in teachers’ decisions to leave their positions (Elfers et al., 2006). However, little research has investigated how these factors may differentially motivate distinct mobility choices.

### ***Job Demands-Resources Model***

Teacher working conditions have been studied in a wide selection of empirical research on teacher attrition (e.g., García et al., 2022; Grissom et al., 2016). Working conditions in rural schools may be different than other contexts in terms of advantages, such as greater autonomy, and disadvantages, like the need to teach outside of expertise area (Monk, 2007). However, research on how working conditions impact teacher mobility, especially in rural schools, is lacking, and studies examining working conditions in general have been largely atheoretical.

To strengthen the findings of this study, the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model was adopted as a theoretical framework to conceptualize working conditions related to teacher mobility. This model posits that all occupations involve two key components associated with job-related stress: job demands and job resources. Demands refer to aspects that require sustained physical, cognitive, or emotional effort. Resources are features that support personal development and achieving work goals (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007).

The JD-R model has been adapted specifically to school contexts to understand better the day-to-day factors that influence teachers’ well-being and effectiveness (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2015). Resources can serve as buffers against demands. However, if there is an imbalance between resources and demands, teachers can experience increased stress and burnout (Granziera et al., 2020), which may influence teachers to move schools (Sims, 2020) or quit the profession entirely (Björk et al., 2019).

## Context

This study was conducted in South Carolina, a racially diverse state in the southeastern United States. Rural schools in the state have among the highest poverty levels in the country, and household mobility in rural parts of the state is also relatively high (Showalter et al., 2023). Over a third of the approximately 54,000 public school teachers in the state teach in rural schools (Cartiff et al., 2024), according to the NCES locale designations used in this study. These classifications are based on population density and proximity to an urban area (city) or an urbanised cluster (town). Based on these urban-centric criteria, cities and suburbs are urbanised areas with populations of at least 50,000 people, towns have populations between 2,500 and 50,000 people, and rural areas are those falling outside of the urban measure (fewer than 2,500 residents) (NCES, 2024b). NCES also subcategorises rural schools based on distance from nearby cities or towns as: close (NCES designation of ‘fringe’; NCES code 41), somewhat removed (designation of ‘distant’; code 42), or far away (designation of ‘remote’; code 43). Less than two percent of rural schools in the state are classified as remote.

## Research Questions

The research questions guiding this study were:

1. How do rural teacher and school characteristics relate to teachers’ reasons for leaving their positions?
2. Do lateral movers and leavers have different primary reasons for leaving their rural schools?

## Methodology

### Sample

Participants in this study were a subset of 1,019 participants who completed the state Teacher Exit Survey in 2024. Of that larger number, 215 were rural school teachers eligible for this study. Nine of those teachers were leaving involuntarily, 16 were changing roles (e.g., moving into administration), and 64 were retiring. Those 89 participants were excluded because they did not answer questions about their motivating reasons for leaving their positions. Five additional participants had incomplete data and were excluded.

This left 121 participants in the final sample. Those respondents were rural school teachers in 2023–24, who were voluntarily exiting their positions to teach in another district (lateral movers) or leave the profession completely (leavers). The sample demographics are shown in Table 1.

**Table 1: Sample Demographics**

| Variable                                 | Category                       | n  | Percentage |
|------------------------------------------|--------------------------------|----|------------|
| Gender                                   | Female                         | 99 | 81.8%      |
|                                          | Male                           | 22 | 18.2%      |
| Race <sup>a</sup>                        | White                          | 84 | 70.0%      |
|                                          | Black                          | 21 | 17.5%      |
|                                          | Other <sup>b</sup>             | 15 | 12.5%      |
| Education                                | Bachelor's degree              | 50 | 41.3%      |
|                                          | Graduate degree                | 71 | 58.7%      |
| Mobility                                 | Lateral mover                  | 81 | 66.9%      |
| Type                                     | Leaver                         | 40 | 33.1%      |
| Remoteness                               | Fringe school                  | 80 | 66.1%      |
|                                          | Distant school                 | 41 | 33.9%      |
| School organisational level <sup>c</sup> | Elementary                     | 45 | 38.5%      |
|                                          | Combined (elementary + middle) | 18 | 15.4%      |
|                                          | Middle                         | 20 | 17.1%      |
|                                          | High                           | 34 | 29.1%      |

<sup>a</sup> Race was unavailable for one participant.

<sup>b</sup> Participants who were not identified as either White or Black were combined into a single Other category due to small numbers.

<sup>c</sup> School organisational level was not available for four participants.

## Procedure

In early April 2024, superintendents and personnel administrators from all public school districts in the state were emailed an invitation to participate in the Teacher Exit Survey. The survey was approved by the Institutional Review Board of the University of South Carolina (#Pro00135523). Of the 73 traditional and three charter districts contacted, 29 districts provided emails for teachers who were not renewing their contracts. Eligible teachers in these districts were emailed a link to the survey in May 2024 and were given until late June 2024 to complete it. Eligible teachers received reminder emails with the link until the survey closed.

The survey employed branching logic. Participants were separated into involuntary and voluntary departers first. Voluntary departers were further classified as retirees, role changers, lateral movers, or leavers. Only participants in the latter two categories answered questions about reasons for exiting. These reasons fit into the categories: (1) job demands, (2) job resources, (3) personal reasons, and (4) policy reasons. Leavers also answered questions about career reasons, but these were excluded from analysis as lateral movers were not asked to respond to them. Responses were matched with data supplied by the South Carolina Department of Education to provide participant demographic information such as gender (0 = male), race (0 = White), education level (0 = bachelor's degree), and years of experience (mean = 11.7, median = 10.0).

School organisational level and poverty information were collected from the 2023-24 state School Report Cards. The school level variable was dummy coded (0 = elementary schools). School poverty was a continuous variable representing the percentage of pupils in poverty (mean = 65.9%, median = 68.7%). In our sample, all the rural schools were either fringe or distant (0 = fringe).

## Measures

In association with a state-funded research consortium mandated with administering an annual voluntary exit survey, our research team developed the Teacher Exit Survey to measure the reasons driving teachers' decisions to leave their positions in PK-12 (pre-kindergarten through high school) public school settings. Item development followed the procedure proposed by Boateng et al. (2018), which includes identifying domains, generating items, and evaluating content validity.

**Table 2: Details about the Teacher Exit Survey**

| Dimensions       | Reliability<br>(Cronbach's $\alpha$ ) | Items                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
|------------------|---------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Job Demands      | .839                                  | <p>Extensive administrative tasks (e.g., meetings, paperwork, compliance reporting).</p> <p>Frequency with which students lacked engagement.</p> <p>Frequency with which students misbehaved.</p> <p>Frequency with which my teaching was interrupted by student assessments.</p> <p>Frequency with which my teaching was interrupted by other school activities.</p> <p>Insufficient time during the school day for lesson planning and preparation.</p>                                                                                                                                                                         |
| Job Resources    | .873                                  | <p>Insufficient administrative support.</p> <p>Insufficient communication with the principal.</p> <p>Insufficient influence over school policies and practices.</p> <p>Insufficient relevant professional development provided.</p> <p>Insufficient support or positive relationships with my colleagues (e.g., fellow teachers, school staff).</p> <p>Insufficient support or positive relationships with the parents of my students.</p> <p>Insufficient autonomy in my classroom.</p> <p>Insufficient physical resources (e.g., textbooks, computers).</p> <p>Insufficient leadership opportunities or career advancement.</p> |
| Personal Reasons | .487                                  | <p>I wanted to take a job more conveniently located to where I live.</p> <p>I moved or am planning to move.</p> <p>I wanted or needed a higher salary and/or better benefits.</p> <p>I wanted to teach a different subject area or a different grade level.</p> <p>I needed a better work-life balance.</p> <p>I was influenced by other personal life reasons (e.g., health, pregnancy/childcare, caring for family).</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
| Policy Reasons   | .740                                  | <p>Dissatisfied with the mandated curriculum and/or standards.</p> <p>Dissatisfied with the student grading and promotion policies.</p> <p>Dissatisfied with the minimum salary schedule (step increases).</p> <p>Dissatisfied with the teacher evaluation procedures.</p> <p>Dissatisfied with the teacher recertification process.</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |

We reviewed the existing literature on teacher exit surveys and teacher working conditions as framed by the JD-R model. Through this content analysis, we identified four dimensions affecting teacher mobility: job demands, job resources, personal reasons, and policy reasons. The reliability coefficients for each dimension and the individual items measuring them are shown in Table 2. Participants indicated the level of importance of different items on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Not at all important, 2 = Slightly important, 3 = Somewhat important, 4 = Very important, 5 = Extremely important).

### **Data Analysis**

Four observations had missing data on the school organisational level variable, and one had missing data on race. These five cases were excluded from the analysis for the first research question. Additionally, two items on the job resource scale each had one missing value. Rather than excluding these cases, the analysis used the average score for the resource scale, ensuring data preservation while maintaining analytical consistency.

To address the first research question, we conducted a multivariate multiple regression analysis, a statistical method that assesses the effect of a set of predictors on multiple dependent variables (Goldwasser & Fitzmaurice, 2001). Prior to the analysis, the core assumptions were tested and met, including multivariate normality, linearity, homoscedasticity, absence of multicollinearity (all VIF values were below 10), and independence of residuals (Durbin-Watson test values close to 2) (Draper, 1998; Rubinfeld, 2011). The four dependent variables (average scores for resources, demands, policy, and personal reasons) were modelled as functions of teachers' demographic characteristics (race, gender, education level, and years of experience) and school characteristics (poverty, locale, and school organisational level). The multivariate test statistic (Wilk's Lambda) was evaluated to assess the significance of the overall model. Univariate tests and parameter estimates were reported for interpreting the relationship between predictors and outcome variables.

To address the second research question, we utilised logistic regression, a statistical method used for modelling the relationship between one or more predictors and a binary dependent variable (Hosmer et al., 2013). First, descriptive statistics, such as mean scores of demands, resources, personal and policy reasons across leavers and lateral movers, were calculated. Three key assumptions of the logistic regression analysis were then evaluated. The absence of multicollinearity was assessed using a generalised variance inflation factor (GVIF). Linearity was examined using residual diagnostics, which yielded one outlier observation with high Pearson and deviance residuals. Further diagnostics showed that including this observation would substantially impact the chi-square and deviance statistics (UCLA Statistical Consulting Group, 2024). After removing the outlier, we plotted a continuous predictor against the log-odds of the predicted probabilities. In all four cases the linearity assumption was met.

In this analysis, the binary outcome variable was the teachers' mobility option (0 = leaver, 1 = lateral mover), which was regressed on four independent variables: resources, demands, policy, and personal reasons. To interpret the direction and magnitude of the relationship between a predictor and the outcome, we used odds ratios (ORs), which estimated the change in the odds of being a lateral mover versus a leaver for a one-unit increase in a predictor. We followed Hosmer et al.'s (2013) recommendation for logistic regression analysis with a smaller sample size to estimate confidence intervals based on the profile log-likelihood.

## Findings

### Research Question 1

To address the first question, we tested the model with four dependent variables associated with demands, resources, policy, and personal reasons (Table 3). The omnibus test yielded statistically significant results for the overall model (Wilks  $\Lambda = .59$ ,  $F(40, 388.6) = 1.43$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Remoteness was the only statistically significant predictor (Wilk's  $\Lambda = .91$ ,  $p = .05$ ) at the multivariate level. Further investigation at the univariate level indicated that remoteness was significantly associated with demands-related and policy reasons but not with personal and resources-related reasons. In the two cases of significant relationships, teachers working in rural distant schools, compared to their peers in rural fringe schools, placed lower importance on reasons associated with demands ( $\beta = -.6$ ,  $t = -2.43$ ,  $p < .05$ ) and policy ( $\beta = -.75$ ,  $t = -2.99$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Additionally, gender played a role in the teachers' perceptions of demands-related reasons. Specifically, rural female teachers rated the importance of reasons associated with job demands .67 standard deviations ( $\beta = .67$ ,  $t = 2.59$ ,  $p < .05$ ) higher than male teachers. In other words, the consideration of demands was not as important for rural male teachers in their decision to leave their current teaching position.

**Table 3: Multivariate Multiple Regression Analysis**

| Variable            | Multivariate Tests |         |       | Univariate Analysis |               |            |              |
|---------------------|--------------------|---------|-------|---------------------|---------------|------------|--------------|
|                     | Wilk's $\Lambda$   | dfs     | F     | Demands (b)         | Resources (b) | Policy (b) | Personal (b) |
| Gender              | .91                | 4, 102  | 2.25  | .67*                | .47           | .33        | -.16         |
| Years of Experience | .98                | 4, 102  | .42   | .002                | -.09          | .01        | .03          |
| Race                | .90                | 8, 204  | 1.37  |                     |               |            |              |
| Other               |                    |         |       | .11                 | .37           | .11        | .49          |
| Black               |                    |         |       | -.37                | -.48          | -.41       | .4           |
| Education           | .94                | 4, 102  | 1.69  | -.28                | .07           | -.26       | .02          |
| Remote              | .91                | 4, 102  | 2.48* | -.6*                | -.43          | -.75**     | -.06         |
| Poverty             | .95                | 4, 102  | 1.41  | .13                 | .22           | .03        | -.05         |
| School Level        | .87                | 12, 302 | 1.26  |                     |               |            |              |
| E/M <sup>a</sup>    |                    |         |       | .11                 | .12           | .51        | -.24         |
| Middle              |                    |         |       | .52                 | .09           | .27        | -.14         |
| High                |                    |         |       | .1                  | .31           | .14        | -.06         |

Note.  $N = 116$ .

Coefficients were fully standardised for continuous variables and partially standardised for categorical variables.

Demands Adjusted  $R^2 = .095$ ; Policy Adjusted  $R^2 = .058$ ; Personal Adjusted  $R^2 = .049$ ; Resources Adjusted  $R^2 = .026$ .

<sup>a</sup> E/M = Combined Elementary and Middle School.

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

### Research Question 2

Descriptive statistics for teachers' responses to items tapping into departure reasons are reported in Table 4 separately for leavers and lateral movers. On average, compared to lateral

movers, leavers gave greater importance to reasons associated with demands and policy-related reasons and lower importance to personal and resource-related reasons. The smallest difference between the two groups was observed in the policy-related reasons. It should be noted that both groups rated the importance of policy reasons as the lowest. The two groups differed the most in their perception of personal reasons. Lateral movers rated personal reasons highest among the four types of reasons, while leavers assigned the highest importance to job demands.

**Table 4: Descriptive Statistics for Reasons for Leaving by Exit Type**

|           | Leavers  |          |           | Lateral Movers |          |           |
|-----------|----------|----------|-----------|----------------|----------|-----------|
|           | <i>n</i> | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | <i>n</i>       | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> |
| Demands   | 39       | 2.67     | 1.12      | 81             | 2.42     | 1.14      |
| Resources | 39       | 2.12     | 0.95      | 81             | 2.30     | 1.05      |
| Policy    | 39       | 1.96     | 0.89      | 81             | 1.91     | 0.92      |
| Personal  | 39       | 2.32     | 0.69      | 81             | 2.83     | 0.88      |

Following this descriptive analysis, we fitted a four-predictor logistic model to the data with independent variables representing reasons for leaving, and the dependent variable representing the teacher mobility option (leaver = 0). The results are reported in Table 5, with both log odds coefficients and odds ratio values. As indicated by the likelihood ratio test [ $\chi^2(4) = 19.55$ ;  $p < .001$ ], the four-predictor model was more effective compared to a baseline intercept-only model and resulted in the following coefficients:

$$\text{Logit}(Y_i) = 1.26 - 0.71 * \text{Resources} + 0.76 * \text{Demands} + 0.07 * \text{Policy} - 0.97 * \text{Personal}$$

**Table 5: Summary of Logistic Regression Model of Leaving the Teaching Profession**

| Predictor | B (SE)        | OR<br>(95% Profile log-likelihood CI) |
|-----------|---------------|---------------------------------------|
| Resources | -.71* (.32)   | 0.49 [.25, .90]                       |
| Demands   | .76** (.29)   | 2.13 [1.23, 3.88]                     |
| Policy    | .07 (.33)     | 1.07 [.55, 2.06]                      |
| Personal  | -.97*** (.29) | 0.38 [.21, .65]                       |

Note.  $N = 120$ .  $\chi^2(4) = 19.55$ .

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

The three coefficients for resources, demands, and personal reasons were statistically significant. A one-unit increase in the perceived importance of demands as a reason for leaving was associated with a 2.13 factor increase in the odds that a teacher left the teaching profession, constituting a 113.5% increase in the odds. In other words, teachers were more likely to leave rather than move to a different district if they perceived the importance of leaving due to demands as higher. A one-unit increase in the perceived importance of resources as a reason to depart was associated with a 0.49 factor decrease in the odds of a teacher leaving the profession, constituting a 50.7% decrease in odds. Conversely, this also indicates that teachers who perceived resource-associated reasons for leaving as higher were more likely to move to a different district rather than choose to exit the profession. Lastly, a one-unit increase in the perceived importance of personal reasons was associated with a 0.38 factor decrease in the odds that a teacher left the profession, constituting a 62.1% decrease in the odds. Similar to the resources independent variable, this indicates that teachers with stronger perceived personal

motives were more likely to move to a different district than leave the profession altogether. Overall, teachers' perceptions of the importance of demands had the strongest association with the likelihood of teachers exiting the teaching profession.

## Discussion

This study investigated teachers' reasons for leaving their positions in rural schools in South Carolina. Specifically, we examined relationships between teacher and school characteristics and different reasons rural teachers gave for leaving their positions. We also analysed whether lateral movers and leavers had different primary reasons driving their choices.

Regarding the first research question, the only statistically significant personal characteristic was gender. Teachers' personal characteristics are not truly reasons they chose to leave the profession or move to a new district. However, these traits are related to experiences individuals have in their positions, meaning that teachers with shared personal characteristics may engage in similar decision-making patterns (Grissom et al., 2016). In our findings, rural female teachers attributed their choice to leave more to job demands than their male peers. This may be indicative of a gendered differential in the magnitude of demands faced by teachers. For example, Lin et al. (2024) found that female teachers in the United States dealt with higher proportions of verbal abuse and physical violence than their male counterparts.

Concerning school traits, the model revealed that teachers in distant rural schools placed less importance on demands and policies in their decisions to leave than teachers in fringe rural schools. Distant rural schools generally have smaller student populations than fringe rural schools and tend to have lower pupil-to-teacher ratios (NCES, 2024a). These factors may reduce workload and student behaviour demands on teachers in more isolated contexts.

Further investigation is needed to build a more nuanced understanding of how teacher gender and school remoteness relate to specific job demands. Few studies have investigated teacher differences between fringe and distant schools (Welsh, 2024), and the existing ones have largely focused on restricted resources in more remote schools (e.g., Bright, 2018). Analyses into gender effects need to take into account that they may result from interactions with other professional (e.g., school level, subject area) and personal (e.g., age) factors. Findings will also need to be considered in the framework of institutionalised gendered roles in the profession (Toropova et al., 2021).

The analysis that focused on the second research question revealed that leavers and lateral movers were statistically significantly different in the emphasis they placed on job demands, job resources, and personal reasons as factors behind their mobility choices. Lateral movers placed greater importance on job resources and personal reasons as motivating factors for leaving their positions. These rural teachers may see these factors as context dependent and believe that they can find better conditions in a different district.

In contrast, participants who emphasised the importance of job demands over other factors had increased odds of leaving the profession completely. Previous research along similar lines is limited, but Kukla-Acevedo (2009) did find that heightened perceptions of student misbehaviour were related more strongly to novice teachers leaving the profession instead of moving to teach elsewhere. Rural teachers who perceive extreme job demands may believe that those stressors would be similar in other districts and that quitting teaching is their best option.

Ultimately, our analyses reveal that distinguishing between lateral movers and leavers may provide valuable and actionable insights toward promoting increased teacher retention in rural contexts. Rural districts losing teachers to other districts may need to focus on increasing or improving job resources for their teachers. For example, training administrators to engage in people-centred leadership may be particularly effective in building trust and collaboration in rural

schools (Tran & Dou, 2019). Teachers leaving the profession, though, may have reached a tipping point with an excess of demands that they do not see a potential to solve by moving to a new district. Districts seeing exiting teachers leave the profession may need to focus on practices that reduce demands. In circumstances in which reducing demands is not feasible, providing supports aimed at mitigating specific demands may still be beneficial. For example, discipline-targeted administrative support may reduce the toll of student misbehaviour. Additionally, teachers who feel like they play a role in school decision-making may display stronger professional commitment (Park et al., 2020), so promoting shared governance may increase teacher retention even when demands are high.

It is important to recognise the limitations of this research. As Carver-Thomas and Darling-Hammond (2017) pointed out, the predictive power of exit surveys may be limited because only departing teachers are polled. They argued that teachers who choose to stay in their positions may have similar challenges, which should be considered. The absence of stayers is an issue we acknowledge in our data. The sample also was limited by two levels of self-selection bias. First, superintendents had to opt in for their districts, and superintendents who did not opt in may lead districts that differ in meaningful ways compared to those in the sample. Additionally, filling out the survey was voluntary in participating districts. Based on broader statewide trends (Cartiff et al., 2024; Dmitrieva et al., 2025), we strongly suspect that leavers were underrepresented in our sample, and those leavers anticipating a possible return to teaching may have been more likely to participate than those leaving permanently. These possible sources of bias, along with the small sample size, limit the strength of our conclusions. To address some of these limitations, we plan in the future to link results from the exit survey to a statewide teacher working conditions survey. Using these measures in conjunction would provide a longitudinal view of stayers and exiting teachers that could be valuable, especially as teachers may not be driven out of their positions by short-term perceptions of their job but instead leave when they see conditions worsening over time.

We also recognise that only interdistrict lateral movers were eligible to complete the survey, as intradistrict movers are considered to be retained by their employing district. Intradistrict mobility in rural areas is likely relatively low, as rural school districts tend to have fewer schools (Williams et al., 2021), but teachers moving to new schools in the same district may have different motivating reasons than interdistrict lateral movers (Goldhaber et al., 2011). Since most teachers' greatest impact comes from the students they teach and the colleagues they work with daily, studying school-level retention is critical and may help reveal equity issues (Elfers et al., 2006).

Finally, it is important to recognise that local context likely influenced the results of this analysis. Despite its quantitative nature, these results may not generalise to rural teachers in other areas of the United States or the world. There also may be important differences even within the state. Follow-up qualitative investigations could investigate whether this is the case.

## Conclusion

Many scholars have recently tried to illuminate the assets of rural communities. It is important to acknowledge these positive conditions (e.g., potential for close-knit relationships) and to recognise that they are frequently mirrored by challenges (e.g., limited populations from which to draw workers). Recruitment obstacles, such as lower compensation (Brenner et al., 2021) and professional isolation (Rhinesmith et al., 2023), may amplify the importance of teacher retention. Teachers leaving rural schools make distinct mobility choices. Understanding differentiated forces driving those choices may help districts retain those teachers. The results of this study indicate that teachers' perceptions of job demands may be meaningfully related to their gender and school remoteness. In general, rural female teachers seemed to ascribe their leaving to job demands more than their male counterparts. Teachers in distant schools placed a lower value on

the importance of job demands as a reason for leaving than teachers in fringe schools. Additionally, teachers leaving the profession entirely were more likely to endorse job demands as the reason behind their decision than lateral movers who rated personal reasons as more important. Rural schools could examine their departing teachers' choices and tailor policy changes to address them and enhance retention.

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### The Zero-Emission School Bus Mandate: Changes, Challenges, and Resistance in Rural New York State

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#### Abstract

A divisive legislative mandate presented an impending deadline to meet zero-emission transportation for student busing in New York State. Though lauded as a progressive environmental measure, this directive proved to lack public support, be a challenge to the infrastructure of rural towns, and threatened the financial solvency of rural school districts. This situation required a repositioning of school transportation as part of the rural infrastructure and demonstrated the need for local voices to counter broad-strokes legislation, with particular attention to the unique needs of rural places.

**Keywords:** zero-emission, rural infrastructure, student transportation, finance, taxpayers, rural advocacy

#### Background

In her first State of the State address (Buffalo Toronto Public Media, 2022), New York Governor Kathy Hochul announced a series of sweeping environmentally minded reforms. These proclamations aligned with the New York State Climate Leadership and Community Protection Act (§ S6955), which aimed “to put the state on a path to reduce statewide greenhouse gas emissions by eighty-five percent by two thousand fifty and net zero emissions in all sectors of the economy” (2019, p. 8). In response, New York initiated changes to student transportation policy, impacting the 50,000 school buses that operated throughout the state (New York State Education Department, 2022). All new school buses purchased after 2027 must be zero-emission vehicles and entire school bus fleets must be composed of fully zero-emission vehicles by 2035, according to the New York State Energy Research and Development Authority (2023; 2025).

The distinct needs of rural places around the globe tend to be sacrificed for the more publicised needs of nearby metropolitan areas. Voices of advocacy for rural areas of New York, often referred to as Upstate, are drowned out by larger urban political forces in the state, namely, New York City. As a former rural school principal in Upstate New York, I took part in speculative conversations in my district when the zero-emission mandate was first introduced. I have witnessed the progression of this policy and now, from a higher education vantage point in Upstate, I note that this is not a singular narrative. This distinct policy wave serves as a real-time case study of metrocentric legislation ignoring the realities of rural contexts.

In this essay, I argue that this piece of metrocentric legislation demonstrates a misunderstanding and ignoring of the realities of daily life in rural places, resulting in a “*spatial and locational discrimination*” (Soja, 2009, p. 3). First, I will detail the significant challenges of implementation in rural Upstate, then will conclude with the implications of this for rural places. In the name of

‘progress’, urban-minded lawmakers generate policy without knowing or caring about the realities of rural life, particularly those facing school districts.

### Key Challenges to Implementation

School transportation is part of rural infrastructure. Without this form of transportation, more than two million students would not be able to access their education (New York School Bus Contractors Association, 2025). Localised, nuanced solutions that take into account the realities of the infrastructure, as well as financial costs, are needed to address the transportation challenges in rural schools. Geography, climate, weather conditions, and access to metropolitan infrastructure shape life in rural places.

In rural New York, extreme winter weather, the large size of school districts, and the electric grid present barriers to fulfilling this mandate. Upstate weather requires rugged and reliable vehicles; there are concerns about the durability and power of electric school buses in the cold (Charette, 2025). In the Adirondack Mountains of New York State, some school districts encompass more than 500 square miles (Keeler, 2023). Furthermore, as I learned while serving as an administrator, small rural roads often have weight restrictions, requiring districts to have a uniquely sized school bus to accommodate isolated locations (DeYoung & Howley, 1992). Here, in these expansive districts, *“where unique road attributes may be known only by members of the local community”* (Ripplinger, 2004, p. 105), technological busing models, which automate routing for maximum efficiency, are not superior to the knowledge of the ones who drive school buses on these roads every day, year after year. One district learned that recharging the buses was not feasible on the electric grid run by their town’s independent electric company (Byrne, 2023). Charging the buses would virtually destroy the electric infrastructure of the region; they did not have the capacity to accommodate these buses. Even if they were able to be charged, one school official commented that *“some of our bus runs are longer than the actual mileage you get on a charge”* (Chudzinski, 2024).

Environmental consciousness comes at a price that is difficult for rural communities to pay. New York State’s plethora of financial incentives and rebates have made fleet electrification an enticing option for some schools. One community was given federal grant monies to assist with the purchase of zero or low emission school buses (Mid-Hudson News Staff, 2023). The community voted to reject the \$1.2 million federal grant for electric buses (Byrne, 2023). This story was echoed throughout the state. In 2024, 10 of the 31 school districts voting on purchasing electric school buses rejected the measure (Fortis, 2024). It is important to note that in many areas of the state, rejections outpaced approvals of zero-emission vehicle when put to taxpayer votes (Carr, 2025). Though New York requires taxpayer approval for significant expenditures, such as electric buses, the reception of the zero-emission mandate has been a source of tension for schools in all contexts. A suburban district received \$3.4 million in grant money for the purchase of 17 electric buses in May 2024 (Gross, 2024). Six months later, taxpayers rejected this grant (Bender, 2024). In another suburban community, proponents assumed that nearby residents welcomed the quiet hum of zero-emissions buses versus hearing *“loud diesel engines”* (James, 2025, para. 4) early in the morning. In densely populated neighbourhoods, quiet motors are certainly appreciated, but in a rural farming community, does the mere sound of an engine warrant a complete overhaul of transportation? The school district’s only remark to the public concerned the bus engine’s volume—nothing more. Still, advocacy groups encourage the public to put pressure on school districts to support and *“reimagine this classic form of student transportation”* (Niccolini, 2024, para. 1) citing student health and environmental concerns related to traditional busing. What suburban districts cite as benefits of zero emissions vehicles do not align with the realities of rural districts.

The financial price associated with upgrading existing infrastructure is another burden on rural places. Most rural school districts in New York State have a bus garage, a large building on school

district property that houses all the vehicles. This arrangement could become obsolete as buses may have to be charged elsewhere in a facility that can accommodate the electrical requirements for charging a fleet. The state government acknowledged that 15% of the state's public school facilities cannot support this requirement while also mentioning that existing busing facilities will need upgrades to fully meet the demands of an electrified fleet (New York State Department of Public Service, 2024). The state government passed responsibility for these building upgrades (which may or may not be accomplished with additional funding granted by the government) to the local schools, instructing them to talk to their local utility provider for more information (New York State Department of Public Service, 2024, slide 36). While this zero-emissions mandate is not entirely unfunded, it is certainly one which strains the already stretched capacities of rural school districts and, in many rural areas, the locally owned and operated power company. One out-of-the-box solution connected to this mandate involved industry. A bus manufacturer was planning to relocate and build a hydrogen production facility, steering one district toward hydrogen-cell buses (Doran, 2024; Moriarity, 2024). However, the company decided against relocation (Chudzinski, 2025), leaving this school district still to answer the question of how they will approach the zero-emission mandate.

### Conclusion

Rural school communities in Upstate New York are stuck between environmental mandates and inequitable realities. This is an example where a *“rural critical policy analysis must recognize that the metrocentric advantage has been leveraged by the consistent framing of rurality as invisible and/or deficient”* (Brenner, 2021, p. 37). Concerns over weather and a lack of shared decision making as demonstrated by rejection of bus propositions, demonstrate an invisibility of rural concerns. Insufficient electrical grid capacity and a lack of industry to support the zero-emission mandate compounds the need for integrated policy solutions between stakeholders in rural places. Although rural schools can be the *“single most resource rich institution”* (Emery, 1988, p. 10) in rural towns, too frequently they are absent from conversations of economic development.

In the same speech where Governor Hochul announced the coming changes to transportation, she proclaimed that *“the days of New Yorkers questioning whether their government is actually working for them are over”* (Hochul, 2022, para. 8). Yet, in rural regions of the state, school districts, local government officials, and those who oversee the rural infrastructure are still wondering if their state government actually is listening to their concerns related to the zero-emission mandate. Recently, New York State offered districts a deadline extension of two years (Arpey, 2025) which is still a tight deadline for the herculean task.

As the dynamic contours of zero-emissions school transportation policies continue to develop, it remains to be seen what the future will hold for schools in rural New York State. Rural school transportation is ripe for the development of integrated solutions. The zero-emission mandate is one of the complex problems facing rural places which assault *“the quality of life we want to see for our communities”* (Gruenewald & Smith, 2008, p. 252). Stakeholders continue to give voice to the distinct needs of their communities in hopes of creating a better future and greater opportunities for students while advocating for policies that acknowledge the unique needs of the rural communities they live in.

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### Beyond Migrants and Stayers: Reimagining Rurality as a Dynamic Space of Mobility

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#### Abstract

This article examines rural youth mobility in China through Yu's story, a young woman who simultaneously calls three places 'home'. First, the story unsettles conventional categories of stayers and leavers in the migration framework. Yu's trajectory highlights how negotiations between family responsibilities and structural constraints, rather than just individual aspirations, become the key determinants of rural youth mobility. Second, it challenges the stability and fixity assumptions embedded in the cultural construction of rurality. By focusing on Yu's transportation practices, from electric bike rides within the village to long-distance bus journeys between towns, the article reveals how rural places are traversed in the complex and dynamic process of everyday mobility, showing how the appearance of stability in rural life is inherently dynamic and fluid. The article argues for recognising rurality as a generative space of connection and mobility, challenging urban-centred assumptions about rural youth mobility.

**Keywords:** *mobility, immobility, rurality, rural mobilities, everyday mobilities, rural youth, rural China*

#### The Mobility Story of Yu

I met Yu at River School in River Village when I was doing four months of ethnographic fieldwork there as part of my PhD project. She was a new full-time substitute teacher on a one semester contract. She lived so close to the school that she could clock in for work without even leaving the house as the GPS-connected system sometimes misrecognised her home as the school. Her father would prepare lunch every day and she would join him for lunch break. Thus, I asked her without a second thought, "So, you're a local here, right?"

"No, I'm not local," unexpectedly, she refused the wording immediately. She explained that River was her Dad's home. She added that she also had another two homes in Flower and Blue; Flower was her Grandma's home, and Blue was her Mum's home (all names of people and places are pseudonyms). Blue was about 20 kilometres from River; Flower was around 150 kilometres; and the distance between Blue and Flower was about 130 kilometres.

She was born in River Village, and her household registration (*hukou*) was recorded there with her father. She moved back and forth between River, Flower, and Blue, living with different family members throughout her primary and high school education. This was in part due to restrictions on migration and access to social services through the *hukou* system. She began primary school in River, transferred to Flower to live with her grandmother, returned to River and lived with her father for middle school, and later attended high school in Blue where she lived with her mother.

This pattern of movement continued into adulthood. While preparing for teaching exams, she took temporary jobs in all three places for different reasons. In Blue, she worked in shops; in River, she briefly filled a substitute teaching role; in Flower, she joined a private tutoring institution while caring for her grandmother as she recovered from surgery. Later, back in Blue, she accepted a similar tutoring position while living with her mother to save money. Therefore, she travelled a lot between the three places, and within each place, not only for periodic stays to work or study, but also for visiting family and friends.

Yu's everyday mobility was sustained mainly through three modes of transportation: electric bike (e-bike), public bus, and carpool. Her favourite was the electric bike. During my fieldwork, she often gave me a ride to the night market seven kilometres away or the parcel pickup point three kilometres from the school. "*My little electric donkey is the best*" she would exclaim loudly over the whooshing winds while we rode together. In River, the e-bike was essential. Only a few main two-lane roads were paved and the rest wound through the village like fine, unpaved capillaries creating a maze of narrow paths. She also rode between River and Blue, a twenty-kilometre trip each way. She preferred the independence of the e-bike to waiting for buses. She knew where to park and recharge the battery and could borrow a family member's e-bike that could handle longer distances.

For trips over a hundred kilometres, like River to Flower, she relied on public transport or asked other people for a lift. She preferred public transport because she always had terrible carsickness in private cars, and she did not like to ask people for help. In her experience, most of the time, River's bus system worked reasonably well. But during my fieldwork, one weekend we had a lunch appointment in the city. That day, she had not realised that the bus service was suspended. After waiting and complaining with others at the stop, she suggested using a ride-sharing app to reach a close public transit hub. From there, she caught a bus and eventually made it to the lunch – a tired, chaotic experience, but she was proud of her wisdom as she was the one who proposed to use the app, and they were lucky enough to get a ride. She concluded her commute story with a proud remark: "*I'm an experienced person*".

### Rural Mobility Beyond Migration Categories

Yu's remarks of "*No, I'm not a local person*" and "*I'm an experienced person*" show her rural identity is deeply entangled with her mobility experiences. It cannot be captured by conventional categories such as place attachment (i.e., stayer) or migration intention (i.e., leaver) (Nugin, 2020), as she built connections between places by moving within, through, and across rural places (Milbourne & Kitchen, 2014).

First, her movements were not for migration purposes, nor were they directed towards a city. Her life trajectory was a result of negotiations between family care arrangements and the hukou regulations. Each move, from River to Flower to Blue, for primary, secondary, and high school depended on how the family balanced caregiving responsibilities with hukou constraints at the time. As a child, she did not fully understand these decisions, which resulted in constant shifting with changing family jobs and locations, evolving relationships, and varying degrees of hukou enforcement across different periods. Despite the complexity, family and hukou proved to be the key determinants for her moves in her school years. Another driving force of Yu's mobility was family network and obligation, especially in her adulthood. Her decisions about jobs were closely tied to where her family members lived. For example, the reason she took a temporary job in Flower was so she could be with her grandmother more often after her surgery. Her job in Blue was low paying, but she could live with her mother to save rent. Her family ties across Flower, Blue, and River formed both her basic travel routes and were a factor behind her movements, creating a personal geography that underpinned her mobility.

Hence, Yu's connections to places were layered and across multiple places based on family ties. Although she refused to be called "*a local*" to River, she identified River as her old home or Dad's home; Blue and Flower were associated respectively with her mother and grandmother. Thus, Yu simultaneously belonged and did not belong to River, Flower, and Blue. Each site was both familiar and unfamiliar, both a place of return and a place of distance. This paradox challenges the common framing of rural mobility as either leaving the village for urban opportunities or staying rooted in a home community (Nugin, 2020). Teacher Yu's experience exemplifies the complexities of life with family and laws: her mobility is not a linear trajectory from village to city, but an ongoing process of circulation, negotiation, and entanglement across multiple rural places shaped by family ties and structural conditions.

### Everyday Rural Mobilities

Yu's mobility also unfolded in small, everyday rhythms rather than just travel across great distances. Similar to rural experiences in other places (see for example Goodwin-Hawkins, 2015; Milbourne & Kitchen, 2014), mobility was an essential part of daily living in River. Yu's "*little electric donkey*" was not only a practical tool but a way of knowing and inhabiting the village. The e-bike connected paths, ponds, and fields through a network of narrow capillary roads. Riding became a sensorial and social experience as well as a way of feeling and knowing the place—in different weather, with different people, or through lending the e-bike to others. This shows that mobility is not just movement between places, but a process through which places themselves are continually made—through the gathering of people, objects, and technologies in particular moments (Sheller & Urry, 2006); it generated different experiences and feelings about the place. For Yu, compared to sitting in a car, she had more sense of control while bicycling. Use and need of the e-bike made visible how mobility was entangled with the village's physical and social geography such as the road conditions and the spatial positioning of homes, re-enforcing that rural roads "*bear stories and shape them too*" (Goodwin-Hawkins, 2015, p. 171). Thus, recognising the types of mobility happening within one rural place helps to challenge the notion of rural immobility or fixity. This perspective highlights ongoing entanglement of social relations, spatial practices, and meanings in the dynamic process of rural mobility.

Yu's story also highlights complexities of mobility and immobility. Her movements between three houses in three places with different family members, provided her multiple spatial moorings (Adey, 2006), offering places of rest, support, stability, and security—in other words, multiple homes each with their own inter-personal connections and familiar surroundings. Each home served as a spatial mooring for her to stay, to be immobile, while at the same time enabling the fluidities for her to be mobile in other ways. Her statements of "*not a local*" but "*an experienced person*" give vivid examples of how "*moorings becoming mobilities and mobilities becoming moorings*" (Adey, 2006, pp. 86–87). She rejected being categorised into, or fixed into, a single place but recognised her experiences of moving around as a positive. This can be seen in her knowledge of how to manage a 40-kilometre commute round trip by e-bike and her pride at problem-solving by using a ride-sharing app. Everyday mobilities, especially long-distance commuting, provided her with a sense of stability and fostered enduring connections with different places.

To challenge the dominant cultural construct of rurality as stability, rootedness, and attachment to place (Milbourne & Kitchen, 2014), this article celebrated Yu's story to illustrate the complexity of rural mobilities. First, her life trajectory offers an alternative to migration-centred narratives. Yu's movements reveal how negotiations between family responsibilities and structural constraints, rather than just individual aspiration, shape rural youth mobility. Also, her trajectory was exclusively in and between rural places which challenges the assumption that mobility is inherently urban or towards urban. Second, by focusing on the transport dimensions of her everyday movements, Yu's experience shows how mobility is essential to rural life, actively

shaping ongoing processes of place-making while complicating the binary of mobility or immobility. Her movements among three homes blur these boundaries as each place provides both stability and the potential for further movement. By foregrounding these dynamic forms of rural mobility, this article highlighted the generative power of the rural in shaping lives and spaces. As I have argued elsewhere (Zhong, 2024), there is a need for reimagining broader social and structural configurations of rurality. Recognising the complexity of rural mobilities offers a critical lens for challenging urban-centred migration frameworks and for revaluing the creative, productive dimensions of rurality.

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### Book Review: Alexander, R. (2024). Higher Education, Place, and Career Development. Routledge.

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#### Introduction

Rosie Alexander's book provides rural education researchers with a valuable resource, with helpful theoretical perspectives and evidence to inform arguments about the nature of rural access to higher education and career transitions beyond. While the study is clearly bounded in an island context of Scotland, the generalisability of the findings to other contexts are fairly clear to me. As I read through the book, I found myself reflecting on my own experiences living and working in island and rural communities. Much of the content resonates with me, even though I am unfamiliar with the research context. This is an academic book and I think is best suited to an academic audience. While the anecdotes presented provide insights into the experiences of young people, the theory surrounding these insights would be somewhat difficult for an education professional or policy maker to digest. I found the structure a little repetitive at times, where concepts were reused from chapter to chapter. That said, there is considerable value in this book as it challenges assumptions and presents alternative ways of thinking about higher education access and career pathways.

#### Chapter Summaries and Reflections

In the first chapter, Alexander introduces us to the context of her PhD study: exploring place as a central theme as it connects to island communities and students engaged in higher education. In setting the scene she makes it clear why the research is important. *"This book concerns the role of place and mobility in the transitions of students into, through, and beyond university."* (p. 2). She argues that this kind of research gives voice to people who are often 'overlooked'. They are seen as peripheral, but Alexander wants to centre their experiences. Of note too is Alexander's positionality as an insider to the context. She takes a clear stand against deficit ascriptions of rurality, arguing that 'remoteness' is a term she uses carefully, acknowledging that the term is most often used by people in metropolitan spaces to stereotype those who live far away--and by extension are disadvantaged because they are far away, on the edge, at the periphery (see also Taylor et al., 2016). But she notes that those who live on the islands, who she goes on to describe, are most concerned about what is near to them--their islands and their communities. And so the scene is set for an exploration of what her research participants actually think.

In Chapter 2, Alexander provides a theoretical basis for the research, unpacking concepts of neoliberalism, metrocentricity, inequality, and mobility discourses. Drawing from Bourdieu's theories of social and capital (Bourdieu, 1986), she discusses 'mobility capital' to explain the propensities of islanders to move for participation in higher education. The chapter also introduces readers to three constructed case studies, based on a synthesis of her research participants' experiences. Helga, Marie and Inga tell their stories of entering university to *"demonstrate the quite different ways that young people can come to leave the islands for higher*

education.” (p. 38). Alexander notes that “*stay and leave decisions are complex and renegotiated over time*” (p. 44).

Chapter 3 is titled *Spatial belongings*. Alexander discusses the concept of 'heterolocal belongings' to explain the enduring connections to the islands that people retain over a life course, despite their movement away to engage in study and career choices.

Chapter 4 is about 'becoming and belonging'. Alexander challenges us to think about the spatial dimensions of becoming through learning. The theoretical unpacking of career as a temporal, social and spatial process will resonate with many who come from rural communities. Indeed, I reflected on my own (and my children's) experiences of growing up on an island (Tasmania) and can see how the experiences of Helga, Inga and Marie align with my own. The discussion about 'becoming' also aligns neatly with my own PhD findings about vocational learning in savanna communities of northern Australia (Guenther, 2006), which similarly commented on the significance of identity formation and mobility.

Chapter 5 is notionally about 'career frameworks for mobility'. While I do see this in the chapter, the themes that stand out to me are more about spatial orientations in careers. Maybe they are the same thing. Leading into the now familiar anecdotes of Helga, Inga and Marie, Alexander emphasises 'spatial horizons', 'spatialised aspirations', 'spatial intentions' and 'spatial frameworks' in the formation of career pathways. These spatialised orientations are set against the apparently 'decontextualised ways' that career decisions are encouraged. The reality that Alexander describes is not an either / or possibility. Rather what seems to emerge is a hybrid decision making hierarchy where career aspirations and spatial horizons come together, and where island horizons are at least temporarily replaced by alternative spatial accommodations. This dynamic is perhaps unsurprising for those of us who have managed multiple urban/rural transitions in pursuit of career or study options.

The sixth chapter adds relationships into the mix of push and pull factors that influence career choices and mobilities. The idea the space as 'socially constructed' is not new (Low, 1996; Roberts & Guenther, 2021), and there is plenty of evidence to show how important relationships are for career choices in rural spaces. While Alexander seems to focus mostly on personal and familial relationships (at least in the three vignettes from Marie, Inga and Helga), the construction of attractive rural spaces includes the broader community (see also Lowe et al., 2019; Versland et al., 2022). Based on Alexander's findings, the reverse may be true for islanders who choose to move away for careers. That is, the loss of island relationships and the gaining of new non-island relationships may make the spatial pull of the islands less appealing. Again from my own personal experience, when I moved from my island home to pursue postgraduate studies and later an academic career, the loss of parents and the out-migration of my children reduced the pull of the island. Meanwhile the establishment of new personal, social and professional relationships drew me to a new space in northern Australia, where more than 20 years on, I enjoy living.

In Chapter 7, Alexander provides a useful theoretical model to help readers visualise the interconnection of concepts introduced earlier. The diagram provides a succinct and clear map of career pathways, integrating the concepts of place, career and relationships with pathways of becoming and belonging across time. Alexander makes what I think is an important observation: “*something like ‘education’ has both a general realisation and a specific, localised, realisation, this is such that feeling a sense of ‘belonging’ in a school context in the islands can create a ‘familiarity’ with education that makes going away to university feel possible*” (p. 147). In my mind, this suggests that a decontextualised representation of education acts something like a bridge from one sector to another, creating familiarity that connects one context to another. On the next page Alexander drops another small but significant observation: “*we can understand that we hold multiple different spatialised positions. So young people in the islands attend school, but they also*

*take part in activities like drama and sports that also have spatialised realisations*". This resonates with some of the Australian literature that talks about Indigenous people navigating 'two worlds' (for example Parsons, 2022). The reality is not that people live in two worlds but rather that they themselves hold multiple spatialised positions, which enable them to successfully navigate the one world they live in at any given time. Alexander's insights here are helpful not only in understanding career pathways for people straddling islands and mainlands, but of those who straddle cultural and class spaces (which are touched on in this chapter)

In Chapter 8 Alexander introduces or reinforces some useful and important provocations. She proposes and questions policy responses in relation to the concept of 'deprivation' which Scotland uses to inform discussions about equitable and widening participation (see Lasselle, 2021; McKendrick et al., 2024). The argument for support is tempered by a recognition that being an islander is not necessarily a problem in itself: "*focusing on rurality as a 'barrier' which requires support to 'overcome' represents only one way of understanding rural space and young people's transitions.*" (p. 173). The aspiration of becoming 'settled', frequently mentioned in this book, is an interesting alternative which recognises that value in higher education is not just about career opportunities. However, Alexander seems to be having a bet both ways here, as she earlier describes the "*double disadvantage*" (p. 170) faced by islanders. This points to the tension that is often discussed in the literature about the need to label rural as 'disadvantaged' to argue for equitable access, while at the same time celebrating the strengths of rural or isolated communities (see also Guenther et al., 2014; Guenther et al., 2015).

The final chapter summarises the six key arguments that arise from the study:

1. The value of a career lens in research into youth transitions
2. The importance of the significance of space in graduate transitions.
3. Breaking down binaries of mobility and place.
4. Breaking down of the notion of spatial belonging as an impediment to mobility, and career as a motivator of mobility
5. The importance not just of career but also of relationships in the ways that graduate pathways develop.
6. The pervasive and problematic neoliberal discourses which frame the ways that policymakers, researchers and students themselves think about their trajectories.

These key arguments will no doubt resonate with many rural education researchers. They provide a useful framework through which access to and value from higher education can be considered.

### Concluding comments

Alexander's book provides valuable evidence about the nature of transitions in the island communities of Scotland where she conducted the research. The theoretical contribution to career progressions in rural communities is also very important. But perhaps more important are the voices of those who shared their stories of engagement in higher education and their trajectories into careers.

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