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**SCHOOL LEADERS AND STUDENT VOICES:
UNDERSTANDING THE EXPERIENCES OF
STUDENTS AT RURAL SCHOOLS**

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UNDERSTANDING THE PROBLEM

- The school as a power source in a community results in implications that affect generations of people through historical, socio-economic, and racial contexts.
- South Carolina is considered the fourth highest priority state in rural education because the achievement and graduation rate is among the nation's lowest for rural students. (Showalter, Klein, Johnson, & Hartman, 2017)
- Principals of rural schools are charged with setting expectations for their school and the surrounding community when it comes to achievement, fairness, equity, and critical self-reflection (Liou & Hermanns, 2017)



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RESEARCH & THEORY FRAMEWORK

Conditions for Learning and Achieving

- Student belonging in school draws from socio-cultural learning theory (Dewey, 1997; Vygotsky, 1980) whereby learning occurs through social interaction within a community.

Community Connectedness

- Student belonging is defined as a sense of connectedness within a learning community (Osterman, 2008).
- "Sense of community is a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members' needs will be met through their commitment to be together," (McMillan & Chavis, 1986, p. 9).
- Students who come from different racial, socio-economic, religious, or geographic backgrounds are less likely to be included within the inclusive boundaries of their learning community groups (Booker, 2006; Howley, 1997)

Characteristics of Rural Settings

- Rural students are more likely to be described as having a strong sense of connection to schools (Bauch, 2001; Howley, 1997)
- Rural communities have been identified as tightly bounded communities with clear definitions of insiders and outsiders (Corbett, 2015; McHenry-Sorber, & Schafft, 2015)

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RESEARCH QUESTIONS

By amplifying the voice of students in the rural education setting, we seek to validate student perspectives on a school leader's role within the building, as well as their own academic livelihood.

How do students of rural schools convey their school experiences in relation to fairness, equity, and community belongingness?

What are the practical implications for school leaders?



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METHODOLOGY/DATA COLLECTION

- **Qualitative case study conducted in 2018**
- **Role-specific interviews**
 - Three members of the administrative team
 - Three district or community leaders
 - One parent who served in a volunteer leadership role at the school
- **Focus groups**
 - Two with 4th grade students
 - One with 7th grade students.
 - Three with parents and families of students enrolled at the school
- **Observations**
 - Documented using ethnographic fieldnotes (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995)
 - School and district meetings
 - Educational events
- **Data Analysis**
 - Researcher memos identifying patterns and emergent themes, which were used to design the coding scheme.
 - Data was subsequently coded using a combination of *a priori* and *in vivo* codes by two separate, co-investigators for validity (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014).
 - Coded data was analyzed by thematic categories related to student experiences in schools, and through an iterative process we identified emergent themes and contradictory evidence.

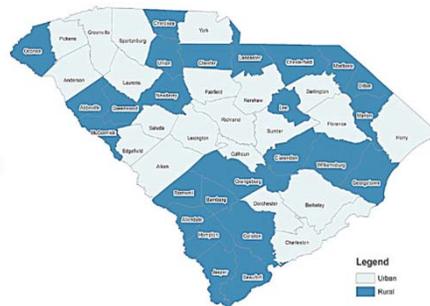
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LENOIR MILLS*: SITE BACKGROUND

- PK - 8 school in rural SC
- Middle school students in a neighboring rural town (Batesville*) attend Lenoir Mills for 6 - 8
- At time of study, Lenoir Mills school leaders are relatively new to school, but both grew up in the district.
- 100% of students receive FRPL
- 80% of students identify as white
- 10% of students identify as black
- 10% of students identify as Lantinx or multiracial



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KEY FINDINGS

Strong community ties make it extremely difficult for new students, whether a late transfer or at the start of middle school, to gain insider status and a sense of belongingness into the Lenoir Mills school community.

Generational Leverage

“That was our big bonding circle, was at the Rec Center, I think. So the people, they don’t leave that community. So, I grew up with the people whose children I’m educating, so they trust in me because they remember me there and we just all grew up together. Lenoir Mills people either leave and come back. They build houses here, so they come home when they want to because it’s farmland that they’ve inherited.”

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KEY FINDINGS

Time plays a significant role in an individual’s sense of belonging to the school community of Lenoir Mills.

“I did not think y’all would ever, ever, ever accept me.”

“I think new kids, they feel different, because they haven’t been here as long as a lot of us. I think they feel left out.”

“They have not established those relationships that my son has. He’s been here since 4k and everybody knows him... All the community members know him.”

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KEY FINDINGS

Transportation becomes a major barrier for students to experience unconditional fairness, as well as, build relationships with peers and adults in the school building.

Belongingness

“The kids who have no transportation to after school activities, football activities, do not get to participate... the pieces that come after school are just as important.”

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KEY FINDINGS

Discipline by way of transportation appeared to be a barrier to student belongingness and perceptions of fairness as consequential absences from the instructional day prevents students from developing quality relationships with peers and teachers.

“The majority of them get bus referrals because they’re on the bus longer. It takes them 45 minutes to an hour. I wouldn’t want to sit on a bus, riding on a bus for 45 minutes where it takes our students who live around here five, 10 minutes. Yeah. There might be some issues on the bus. They might be a little impatient. Maybe it’s hot on the bus and they’re tired.”

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RECOMMENDATIONS & RESEARCH

School Leaders

Create relationship building opportunities that foster a sense of belonging for students residing outside of the community before the start of middle school.

Communicate and uphold the expectation for inclusion, fairness, and equitable practices among school staff towards all students.

School Staff

Critically reflect on known and unknown biases towards students based on race, gender, geographic location, class, and disciplinary status.

Future Study

Research multiple rural school sites to explore how experiences of belongingness and fairness by students of color may differ from one another.

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