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## Rural Inclusive Education for Students with Disabilities in the United States: A Narrative Review of Research

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## Rural Inclusive Education for Students with Disabilities in the United States: A Narrative Review of Research

Katie M. McCabe  
Andrea L. Rupp

*Despite a long history of overrepresentation in segregated settings (Brock, 2018), students with disabilities who require extensive supports are more likely to receive inclusive placements in rural schools. In this paper, we present findings from a narrative literature analysis of inclusive education for students with disabilities in rural schools located in the United States. Our search yielded 24 articles, published between 2002 and 2019, which reveal three storylines: (a) perceptions about inclusive education in rural schools and communities, (b) inclusive placements are common for students with disabilities, and (c) access to resources is a factor for rural schools to provide inclusive education programs. The National Rural Education Association (NREA) has prioritized “building capacity to meet the needs of diverse and special populations” and so this review thoroughly examines special education practices in rural schools and describes how the diverse qualities and contexts of rural schools contribute to inclusive education practices.*

The narrative of students with disabilities who have extensive support needs is a story of segregation. While placements in general education settings have increased for students with disabilities overall (McLeskey et al., 2012), inclusive placements for students with disabilities who require extensive supports have remained stagnant for the past 16 years (Kurth et al., 2014). Students with extensive support needs are students with disabilities who are most often identified under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) disability categories of autism, intellectual disability, multiple disabilities, and deaf-blindness (McCabe et al., 2020). This group of students often require intensive support and services; therefore, in this review they will be referred to as *students with extensive support needs* (ESN). Most students with ESN have been educated in segregated settings since the United States Congress passed the Education of All Handicapped Children Act (EHA) in 1975 (Brock, 2018). In fact, 93% of students with ESN are excluded from general education settings (Kleinert et al., 2015). Placement decisions in segregated classrooms exclude students and result in inequitable access to general curriculum content and social opportunities in schools (Wehmeyer et al., 2020). In order to dismantle the inequitable structures in schools and examine the unintended consequences of special education policy and practice, research must expose different narratives about inclusive education.

To date, the progress to secure inclusive placements for students with ESN has been minimal

(Kurth et al., 2014) while students with learning disabilities have experienced the most change from segregated to inclusive educational settings (McLeskey et al., 2012; Williamson et al., 2020). According to the most recent report to Congress on the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 64% of students with a disability are considered to have inclusive placements (i.e., spending more than 80% of the day in a general education class). Although students with ESN do not make up a singular disability category under IDEA, conclusions can be drawn about placement patterns for this group by looking at categories under which they normally qualify for special education. For example, only 17.4% of students with intellectual disabilities, 39.7% of students with autism, 25.7% of students with deaf-blindness, and 14.3% of students with multiple disabilities are taught in general education classes for more than 80% of the day (United States Department of Education, 2021).

Learning in general education environments offers academic and social benefits for students with and without disabilities (Carter et al., 2016; Kurth et al., 2015) and research has demonstrated the detrimental effects of placement in segregated settings for students with disabilities. Students who are instructed in segregated classroom settings are sometimes disallowed access to certified and trained teachers and age-appropriate peers who can serve as reliable communication and learning partners (Kurth et al., 2016). Students in segregated settings are more likely to receive instruction which is neither rigorous

(Bacon et al., 2016; Kurth & Mastergeorge, 2010), engaging, (Pennington & Courtade, 2015) nor aligned with grade-level curriculum (Kurth et al., 2016). Often, Individualized Education Program (IEP) teams justify segregated settings because students require individualized and specialized instruction (Kurth et al., 2019), but according to Causton-Theoharis et al. (2011), individualized instruction occurs less frequently in segregated settings compared to instruction which takes place in the general education context.

In rural schools, students with disabilities are more likely to be educated in general education settings than their urban and suburban counterparts (Brock & Schaefer, 2015; Jung & Bradley, 2006). Findings suggest that geographic location is an important factor in determining placements which incorporate more time in the general education classroom. Inside and outside of the classroom, rural communities create a natural social network and support for students with disabilities (Collins, 2008). Despite the National Rural Education Association's (NREA) research priority of "building capacity to meet the needs of diverse and special populations" (NREA, 2016), studies have not explored the ways in which various school contextual factors may influence placement decisions in rural schools (Hott et al., 2019; McCabe et al., 2020). In the United States, rural schools are characterized by a diversity of community, economic, and cultural contexts (Schafft & Biddle, 2014). Features include declining student enrollment, reduced funding sources, globalization of local economies or policies, and strong school-community relations (Biddle & Azano, 2016). These features of rural schools provide a useful lens for understanding how contextual factors might influence inclusive education patterns across school locales. A new narrative of inclusive education is necessary to understand the experiences of students with disabilities in rural areas.

In 2013, Burton et al. published a narrative review of literature examining rural teachers. Four decades of research articles were used as rhetorical documents that articulated the narrative about rural teachers in the United States. Burton et al. (2013) used narrative methodology as an "interpretive device" to conduct a literature review to order and clearly define the "landscape" of stories about rural educators. They revealed rural teachers feel isolated professionally, they are different from urban or suburban teachers, they may lack specialized knowledge or proper teaching credentials, and they are often resistant to change. These researchers also

stressed the importance of focusing future rural research on equitable education for the large number of students educated in rural schools.

The current literature review replicates the methodology designed by Burton and colleagues (2013) to complete the narrative of rural inclusive education guided by the following research question: What narrative storylines emerge from literature about inclusive education in rural schools? In this review, we first address historical background and implications of inclusive education for students with disabilities and then apply this background to the rural context. Our review contributes to the narrative of rural school research by exploring how the attributes of rural schools support inclusive education for students receiving special education services.

### **Narrative Beginnings: The History of Least Restrictive Environment**

It can be difficult to define the root causes of inequitable educational opportunities for students with disabilities, but an examination of the historical evolution of Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) policy provides some clarity. In 1975, PL 94-142, or the Education for All Handicapped Children Act, was enacted and students with disabilities were guaranteed a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) in a setting with students without disabilities to the "maximum extent appropriate" (Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act, H.R. 1350, Pub. L. No. P.L. 108-446, 2004). This principle, known as the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) (Rozalski et al., 2011), ensures that students are removed from general education only when the use of supplementary aids and services are not successful in meeting student needs within the general education setting.

In a review of legal influences on LRE policy, Rozalski et al. (2011) noted that decisions from court cases have offered suggestions for appropriately determining LRE for students with disabilities, but no cases pertaining to LRE have been heard by the Supreme Court, and, therefore, no legislative decisions about LRE can be applied to the entire country. Court cases have made decisions that have improved the LRE decision process. For example, *Roncker v. Walter (1983)* asked if the district considered general education as a placement before an alternative placement. Three cases, *Daniel R. R. v. Board of Education (1989)*, *Greer v. Rome City School District (1991)*, and *Oberti v. Board of Education (1993)*, all determined districts should

provide students with the appropriate supplemental services to educate the student in the general education classroom. Court decisions continued to insist the general education setting was the preferred placement for students with disabilities (Sauer & Jorgensen, 2016). Special education court cases led to the inclusion of new components in future reauthorizations of the 1975 legislation, which was re-named the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act in 1990 (IDEA; Yell et al., 1998). However, under the current reauthorization of IDEA (2004), schools still struggle to determine the appropriate LRE for students with disabilities (Rozalski et al., 2011). Despite the good intentions of the LRE provision, scholars have been critical of the inequitable outcomes of placement rates for students with ESN (Sauer & Jorgensen, 2016; Taylor, 1988).

In the decade before students with disabilities were guaranteed FAPE, scholars conceptualized the idea of a continuum of placement options (Deno, 1970; Reynolds, 1962). Today, districts are required to offer a full continuum of placements to students with disabilities (IDEA, 2004). Placements range from general education classes as the least restrictive environment, to alternative placements where students are less integrated, such as residential schools (IDEA, 2004). However, some view the continuum of placements as problematic because it is based on the misconception that more intensive services can only be provided in more restrictive settings (Hyatt & Filler, 2011). As a result, vague federal policies have created disparity in special education placement decisions and students with disabilities who require extensive supports are disproportionately placed in more restrictive settings (Ryndak et al., 2014). Similarly, some have reasoned that special education policy perpetuates ableism, as it is driven by, and embedded in, cultural beliefs about ability and normalcy (Sauer & Jorgensen, 2016). However, with recent practices in school-wide support, such as Response to Intervention (RTI), some scholars wish to maintain the continuum of placements to prevent the blurring of special and general education (Fuchs et al., 2010). Regardless, the continuum of special education placements has not generated equitable opportunities for all students with disabilities to be educated in the general education context.

### **Narrative in Context: Rural Schools**

Across the country, nearly 9.3 million—or almost one out of five students—are enrolled in a

rural public school. More students attend rural school than the combined enrollment of the United States 85 largest school districts (Showalter et al., 2019). About a quarter of rural students are of a racial minority and fewer than 4% of rural students are English language learners (Showalter et al., 2017). Recently, rural schools have experienced changing student demographics, especially in the increase and concentration of racially and linguistically diverse students (Johnson et al., 2018). Poverty rates have increased in rural areas; currently about half of rural students report eligibility for subsidized lunch programs (Showalter et al., 2017). Scholars have noted the impact of demographic shifts in rural areas and the increased challenges for rural schools to provide appropriate special education services for students with disabilities. (Johnson et al., 2018). About one out of seven rural students qualify to receive special education services in the United States (Showalter et al., 2019). In addition, rural children aged 3-17 are more likely to be diagnosed with a developmental disability and are less likely to receive Special Education or Early Intervention Services compared to children living in urban areas (Zablotsky & Black, 2020). Nevertheless, attributes of rural schools facilitate or hinder schools' efforts to meet the needs of students with disabilities.

### ***Assets of Rural Schools***

Biddle and Azano (2016) urge researchers to redefine “the rural school problem” and instead consider how unique assets of “rural communities may offer in new or alternative ways forward” (p. 317). Rural schools can positively contribute to a foundation for an inclusive school atmosphere. The school-community relationship not only benefits students with disabilities (Collins, 2008), but also contributes to positive educational outcomes for all students (Schafft & Biddle, 2014). Students attending a smaller school have been found to perform better academically compared those attending larger schools, especially in schools with low socio-economic status or high percentages of students from racially diverse backgrounds (Schafft & Biddle, 2014). Increasing diversity and minority representation in rural areas have prompted schools to be a driving force of positive change within rural communities (Corbett, 2006; Jimerson, 2005). Schools can further promote inclusive practices within the community by fostering strong school and community relationships, pursuing equitable and integrated teaching practices, and pushing for more

equitable school policies (Tieken, 2014). Teacher investment in the rural community can develop more inclusive and individualized learning opportunities for students (Bauch, 2001; Tieken, 2014).

### ***Rural School Challenges***

Even with positive qualities, rural communities face barriers to providing students with disabilities an inclusive education. Declining rural economies and population loss make it difficult for districts to meet the demands of rising operational costs and declining enrollment (Bard et al., 2006). Rural schools also have difficulty recruiting and retaining highly qualified teachers, especially in shortage areas (e.g., special education, STEM teachers). Additionally, state and federal regulations may create complicated barriers that may not attend to the needs of rural schools (Schafft & Biddle, 2014). For example, legislation implemented from the federal level (e.g., No Child Left Behind (NCLB)) limits local control of decision-making in education policies (Jimerson, 2005). While a rural community could be considered an asset, some rural scholars have provided a more critical stance to utilizing community as a central discourse for rural education. For example, Corbett's (2014) critique suggests the continued positive perception of community is problematic because it perpetuates nostalgic and idyllic notions of rural education and may ignore how the concept of community can be unintentionally used to mask exclusionary practices. Using an idealized vision of community poses a challenge for rural students with disabilities because the conflated sense of community and uniformity may result in overlooked student diversity and the continued use of exclusionary practices. Nevertheless, the combination of unique and contrasting characteristics of rural schools work together to define the capabilities of rural schools possess to create an inclusive education environment.

### **Merging Narratives: Rural Special Education**

In the United States, 48 states provide special education services to at least one in ten rural students (Showalter et al., 2017). Students who are eligible for special education services require additional and specialized services. Rural schools face challenges providing special education services due to federal policies which do not recognize the varying contexts of rural communities on top of rising poverty rates, limited resources, and personnel shortages (Rude & Miller, 2018). Additionally, establishing separate classrooms in rural districts is not often justified due

to few students requiring placements in a special class (O'Dell & Schaefer, 2005). The difficulty of staffing rural schools with personnel in high needs areas, like special education, creates barriers in providing required services for students with disabilities.

### ***Rural Special Educators***

Overall, rural districts face the challenge of hiring and retaining special education teachers. Researchers have noted the smaller pool of applicants, fewer benefits, and lower salaries contributing to the shortage of special education teachers in rural areas (Burton et al., 2013). Qualified teachers who are prepared to work in rural areas are uncommon because teacher preparation programs are not typically designed and focused on training teachers to teach in rural schools (Azano et al., 2019) or lack place-conscious pedagogy (Reagan et al., 2019). Rural special education teachers may find they lack job efficacy or satisfaction because their position requires them to undertake multiple roles and responsibility for large caseloads with varying needs (Berry & Gravelle, 2013). Limited teaching staff in special education departments in rural areas may cause a feeling of isolation among these professionals (Weiss et al., 2014). Often, special education teachers do not have an extended professional learning team within the district with whom they can collaborate. Additionally, the lack of access to professional development for teachers in rural areas pertaining to students with disabilities requires special educators to be highly skilled and innovative within their job (Collins, 2008). Special education teachers, because of their training to work with diverse populations, can be leaders for changing school policies for inclusive practices (Collins et al., 2017), but hiring and retaining special educators is a contributing factor to the inequitable education opportunities for students with disabilities in rural schools (Downing & Peckham-Hardin, 2007).

### ***Rural Inclusive Education***

While scholars have found it important to study "place-defined school phenomena" (Burton et al., 2013, p. 1), the extent to which equitable opportunities and experiences are afforded to students with disabilities within rural schools in the United States has not been fully explored. While "programs and strategies for students with special needs" was the most common topic noted in a review of rural education research, studies did not

specifically address the inclusive education practices in rural schools. (Arnold et al., 2005). A large portion of studies have focused on schools within urban settings and, therefore, rural schools have frequently been left out and misunderstood within the greater body of literature (Biddle & Azano, 2016). Rural schools, while often geographically distant from large metropolitan areas, may experience similar inequities as their urban counterparts (e.g., teacher shortages, access to resources, poverty). However, rural schools have unique attributes, such as limited options for placements (O'Dell & Schaefer, 2005), impacting the facilitation of inclusive education services.

### **Framing the Narrative: A Review of Literature**

In their review, Burton et al. (2013) cited Glaser and Strauss's (1967) explanation that library materials are similar to participants in case study research because "each text has a voice that needs to be heard." Using published works as artifacts can contribute important elements and analysis in research (Alexander, 2020). Burton and colleagues refer to a "storyline" as a narrative thread connecting themes throughout the literature and using this narrative as a form of knowledge and communication. A review of literature creates an understanding of how the current established body of literature narrates common themes and reveals missing information about a topic. In this review, systematic search and qualitative analysis revealed storylines which contribute to a larger narrative about inclusive education in rural schools.

### **Method**

To answer the research question, we reviewed the literature on inclusive education and rural schools in the United States. Figure 1 provides a visual representation of the search process. Three databases, Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC), Education Research Complete, and APA PsychInfo were used to complete a search for articles related to rural schools and inclusive education. The following search terms were used to conduct a broad search: rural\* school\* AND "inclusive education." Initial searches with more specific terms, such as "students with disabilities," limited searches and resulted in sometimes less than 10 articles. Literature published after 2002 was reviewed to explore the impact of passing the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) act. NCLB was a pivotal legislation for rural schools as it ignored rural features and defined requirements that

became challenging for rural districts to meet (Jimerson, 2005), including the "one size fits all" design, assuring every student with a disability was taught by a high-quality special education teacher (Brownell et al., 2005; Sindelar et al., 2018). This timeframe is also selected for this review because it is when access to the general curriculum for students with disabilities became a requirement and was later reinforced by IDEA in 2004. These mandates indicated the importance of students with disabilities access general education content and context and is consistent with what inclusive practices may look like today (Ryndak et al., 2014). This review focuses on studies of rural inclusive education in the United States to explore the impact of federal special education legislation on rural schools and the implications of disproportionate inclusive placements for students with disabilities.

The literature search only included studies that were published in peer-reviewed academic journals and published between 2002 and 2019. This yielded 186 results (68 articles from ERIC, 101 from Education Research Complete, and 18 from APA PsychInfo). After duplicates were removed, we applied additional inclusion criteria through an abstract review. Articles were included if they were research studies (e.g., qualitative, quantitative, mixed methods, or single case design), conducted in a rural school in the United States, and focused on inclusion of students with disabilities or special education teachers. A total of 173 articles were excluded because they did not meet the above criteria. Next, the first author read the full text of the remaining 13 articles which excluded two more articles. The first excluded study did not have research questions which focused specifically on the rural context (Berry, 2011) and the second was excluded after a full review because it was found not to focus on students with disabilities (Parsons & Vaughn, 2013). A total of 11 articles remained from the electronic database search.

We then conducted ancestral searches of the 11 reference lists of articles found in the database search process and hand searches were conducted from the three journals specifically focused on rural education: *Journal of Research in Rural Education* (JRRE), *The Rural Educator*, and *Rural Special Education Quarterly* (RSEQ). As a result of the hand searches, 13 additional articles were included. The combination of the hand search and electronic database search resulted in a total of 24 articles to be included for this review.

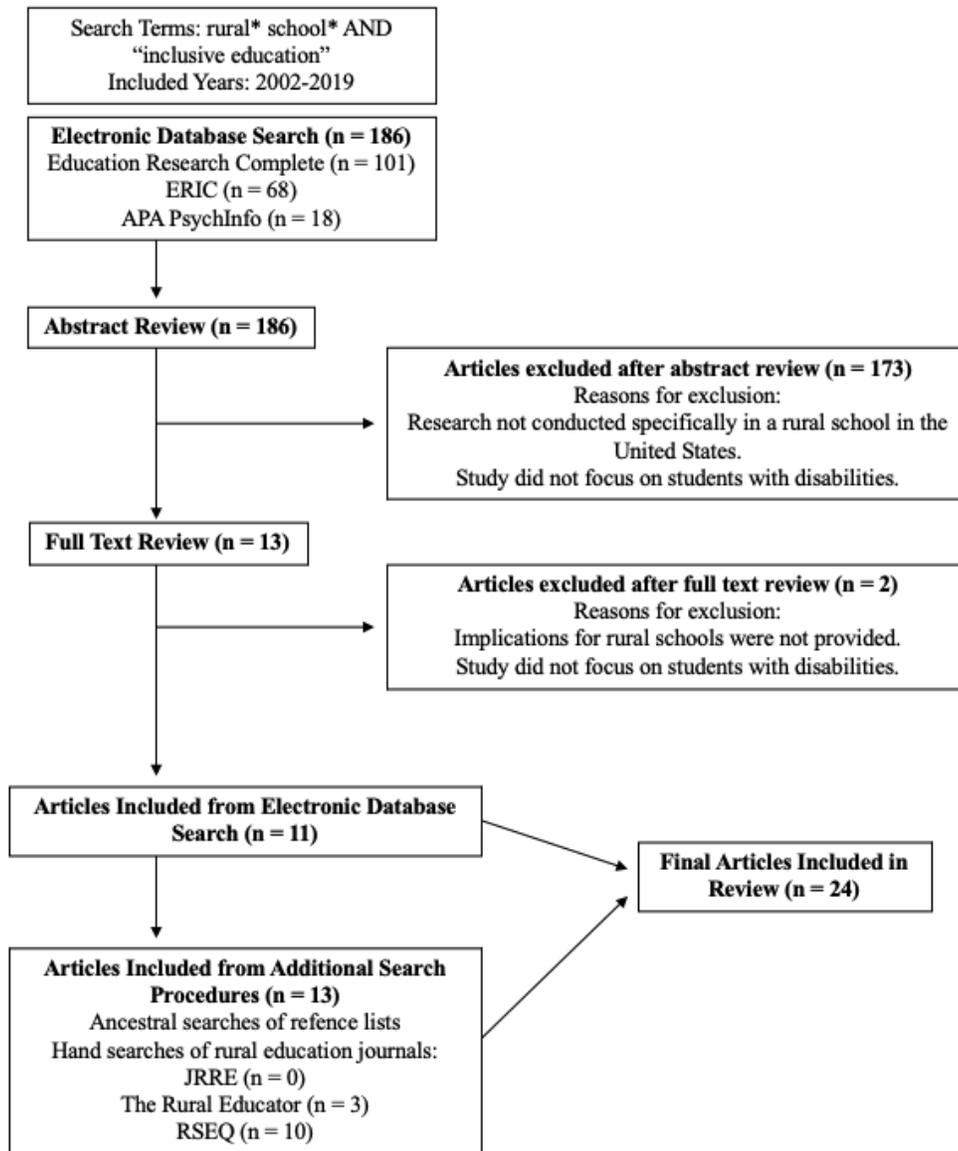


Figure One: Search Process and Results

To synthesize the included literature and identify themes, articles were reviewed through a multi-level coding process (Saldaña, 2015). To devise themes, the purpose of each article was discerned from the research questions. Using Burton et al. (2013) as a framework for a narrative review of the literature, the first author examined findings in relation to dialogue, setting, character, and narrative in order to expose the storyline of rural inclusive education. Dialogue refers to how the research was conducted. Setting and characters indicated where the research was done and who was involved in the research (i.e., participants). The narratives became the themes in the literature,

which contributed to the plot or purpose of the research ultimately revealing the “storyline” of inclusive education in rural schools. The first author worked to identify themes and presented findings to the second author. To establish credibility of identified themes, the authors engaged in peer debriefing which resulted in providing critical feedback on interpretations of the literature synthesis (Brantlinger et al., 2005).

## Results

The research included a range of methods. Baumeister and Leary (1997) advocate for methodical diversity in narrative literature reviews because they are meant to address broader or more abstract questions. Articles were located in four different journals: *Rural Special Education Quarterly* ( $n = 18$ ; 75%), *The Rural Educator* ( $n = 4$ ; 17%), *Teaching Education* ( $n = 1$ ; 4%), and *Journal of Research in Special Educational Needs* ( $n = 1$ ; 4%). Half of the studies were published between 2003-2007 ( $n = 14$ ; 58%). In the next five years of research (i.e., 2008-2012) only five (21%) articles were published. In the most recent five years (i.e., 2013-2017) an additional five (21%) articles were published. While some studies focused on the comparison of rural schools to their urban or suburban counterparts, most the studies discussed school characteristics which influence inclusive education practices in rural areas. The Appendix, available online at XXXX, lists characteristics of all 24 studies and can be accessed as a supplemental resource in this online appendix.

### Narrative Themes

Using the Burton et al. (2013) narrative content analysis framework (i.e., dialogue, setting, characters, narrative), we identified the following storylines about rural inclusive education: (a) the perceptions about inclusive education in rural schools and communities contribute to inclusive or exclusionary practices, (b) inclusive placements are common for students with disabilities and increase access to general education context and content, and (c) access to resources is an influential factor in the ability for rural schools to provide inclusive education programs. A summary of the main findings of each article and alignment with “storylines” can be found in Table 2 of the online appendix. Below, we define each storyline through the findings from the included articles.

#### *Rural Perceptions About Inclusive Education*

In rural school research, the most common narrative shows that perceptions about the benefits of inclusion seem to be one of the most impactful factors influencing inclusive practices. Almost half of the included studies had findings which described how inclusive education is perceived among staff, students, and community members. In rural schools, the feelings of school staff and students contribute to

inclusive or exclusionary practices for students with disabilities (Hammond & Ingalls, 2003) and are often based on the perceived effectiveness of inclusive education (Nagle et al., 2006). Low expectations held by staff about students with disabilities and the extent to which students with disabilities are accepted by peers also impact inclusive practices (Short & Martin, 2005).

**Perceptions of Staff.** Even if inclusive programming is provided, benefits may not be agreed upon among special and general educators. Martin et al. (2003) found polarized perceptions about inclusion in rural schools between special and general education teachers. Interestingly, in a school staffed by educators who were found to be unsupportive of inclusive practices, more than half of educators stated they were, in fact, providing instructional programs which were individualized for students with disabilities (Hammond & Ingalls, 2003). Findings from Shoulders and Krei (2016) suggested varying perceptions about inclusion could result from educators’ feelings of efficacy about teaching students with disabilities. Holding high expectations for students receiving special education services could also impact perceptions about inclusion (Nagle et al., 2006), as well as a lack of shared responsibility for students with disabilities (Martin et al., 2003). In a survey of elementary and secondary teachers, Ross-Hill (2009) concluded general educators have a strong influence on inclusive practices in a rural school. Martin and colleagues (2003) recommended implementing more collaborative decision-making to influence a unified view of the benefits of inclusion. Combined findings from Martin et al. (2003) and Ross-Hill (2009) suggest that collaboration among general and special educators is necessary to support inclusive practices in rural schools.

**Perceptions of Peers.** In addition to staff members, the acceptance of students with disabilities by peers without disabilities is a contributing factor to inclusive education, especially in social domains. In an intervention study, Leigers et al. (2017) provided professional development as a way to unify a fragmented view of the social benefits of inclusion. Participants reported the program increased inclusive practices and friendships between students with and without disabilities. The benefit of the intervention was seen throughout the school and community. Similarly, Short and Martin (2005) examined teachers’ and students’ beliefs about inclusion in a rural high school. Across all groups, socialization

was an agreed-upon benefit of inclusive education. Finally, peers' positive perceptions of each other were found to be a crucial aspect of an inclusive climate (Smoot, 2004). In summary, peers have a significant influence on inclusive education outcomes in rural schools and communities.

**Perceptions of the Community.** A close-knit rural community can play an important role in providing social opportunities for students with disabilities (Downing & Peckham-Hardin, 2007). Social relationships influence inclusive education, especially in rural schools (Leigers et al., 2017; Nagle et al., 2006). Responses from a survey (Rude et al., 2005) described the needs and challenges of educating students with ESN in rural areas. The greatest strength of rural districts was that students with ESN experienced more social interactions with peers with and without disabilities throughout their school day and within the community (Rude et al., 2005). In addition, the unique aspects of a rural community may allow educators to balance community-based instruction and time in general education for students with ESN in rural schools (Collins, 2003). This strength of social engagement complements the importance of community perceptions about inclusive practices in rural areas.

### ***Inclusive Placements***

Rural students with disabilities are more likely to be educated in the general education classes compared to students who are enrolled in schools in other localities. A total of five studies had findings which contributed to this narrative. In a mixed methods study, Bouck (2005) found among rural, urban, and suburban schools, the self-contained setting was the least used setting for students with disabilities. However, their findings indicate a large percentage of students with extensive support needs in rural schools are still educated in segregated settings, compared to other students with less intensive support needs. Jung and Bradley (2006) used the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, Kindergarten cohort, to explore differences of special education placements between rural and non-rural schools. In rural schools, 77.3% of students with disabilities spent 10% or less of the school day outside of the general education classes and students in rural schools were the least likely group of students to receive special education services outside of the general education environment (Jung & Bradley, 2006).

Bouck (2005) also found curricular decisions coincides with special education placements in rural schools, meaning students are more likely to have access to the general curriculum in rural schools. However, inclusive placements and equitable curriculum access are not universal across disability categories. Studies revealed students with less extensive support needs were more likely to be educated in inclusive classes and have access to general education curriculum than students with extensive support needs. In rural areas, students with more support needs tend to receive less access to general curriculum than students who require fewer program modifications and accommodations (Bouck, 2005; Pennington et al., 2009). Some researchers addressed this imbalance by focusing on specific interventions for students with more extensive support needs to increase meaningful access to the general education curriculum through specific university-partnership trainings (Busby et al., 2012; Courtade et al., 2013).

### ***Access to Resources***

Thirteen articles tell the narrative of special education personnel in rural schools. Specifically, the challenge of hiring qualified personnel was an important finding across studies. The structure and staffing of rural schools are found to influence special education services. In this review resources include (a) special education personnel, (b) teachers' professional networks, and (c) professional development or preparation partnerships.

**Special Education Personnel.** Rural schools face difficulties recruiting and retaining educators. This especially becomes problematic for rural schools and their ability to provide inclusive education placements for students with disabilities (Ludlow et al., 2005). In rural schools, fewer special education teachers are available to serve students with a wide variety of needs; therefore, students may be educated in general education classes out of necessity (Pennington et al., 2009). This may place responsibility solely on paraprofessionals to support students with disabilities in general education settings (Riggs & Riggs, 2002), however one study suggested training paraprofessionals can increase the number of individuals who are able to provide adaptations in general education (Giangreco et al., 2003). In another study, Nagle et al. (2006) defined characteristics of rural schools which were successful at educating students with disabilities. Schools included in the

study held high standards for their students while maintaining close ties with the community and utilizing their resources to support students' individualized needs. Together the findings from Pennington et al. (2009), Riggs and Riggs (2002), Giangreco et al. (2003), and Nagle et al. (2006) suggest personnel factors in the rural context influence the inclusion of students with disabilities.

The findings about personnel in rural schools suggest that rural locations may not have access to an appropriate number of personnel to provide an inclusive education. However, Pennington et al. (2009) found the ratio of special education staff to students with disabilities is higher in rural schools compared to urban schools, although the greatest personnel need for rural schools is the need for school employees trained to work with students with ESN (Pennington et al., 2009; Rude et al., 2005). Because of the lack of community resources in rural areas to serve students with extensive support needs (Rude et al., 2005), rural schools need more teachers with specialized training (Busby et al., 2012; Courtade et al., 2013).

**Professional Networks.** Special education teachers are often one of few special education employees in the district and, therefore, may experience professional isolation (Berry & Gravelle, 2013). Special educators also feel they do not share responsibility with general educators to meet the needs of students with disabilities, so they may need to become an advocate for their students (Berry et al., 2011). Collaborative and co-teaching practices can help eliminate the feeling of isolation and increase shared responsibility of students (Wischnowski et al., 2004). Therefore, the ability to collaborate with non-special education staff might be of heightened importance in a rural school.

**Professional Development and Preparation Partnerships with Universities.** When a school has access to a university partnership, general and special educators' ability to facilitate inclusive education programs increases. Limited collaboration, scheduling conflicts, and lack of support given to teachers was found to create challenges when implementing inclusive practices (Leatherman, 2009). Hoppey (2016) found when professional development was offered to educators through a university partnership program, teachers received opportunities to learn and discuss teaching students with disabilities in general education classes. The

university partnership increased new ideas and changed perceptions to focus on inclusive practices.

Some studies have attempted to improve rural districts' ability to hire staff with skills to provide equitable outcomes for students with disabilities. Partnerships between universities and rural schools may increase the number of qualified teachers working in rural schools (Busby et al., 2012; Hoppey, 2016; Wischnowski et al., 2004). Likewise, training paraprofessionals through university partnerships can facilitate inclusive practices in rural schools (Giangreco et al., 2003). Research has revealed a limited number of specialized teachers working rural schools (Ludlow et al., 2005; Rude et al., 2005) but also recommends professional development to train staff with skills to meet the needs of students within the rural context (Berry et al., 2011).

## Discussion

We applied a narrative content analysis (Burton et al., 2013) to review the current literature and found the literature on inclusive education in rural areas is defined by three storylines: (a) the perception about inclusive education in rural schools and communities contributes to inclusive or exclusionary practices, (b) inclusive placements are common for students with disabilities and increase access to general education context and content, and (c) access to resources is an influential factor in the ability for rural schools to provide inclusive education programs. This review exposes the gaps for continued investigation of Least Restrictive Environment decisions for students with disabilities attending rural schools.

Overall, providing an inclusive education for students with disabilities seems to be more common in rural schools as compared to urban and suburban locations. However, a major concern of rural areas and schools is access to sufficient resources to adequately support students with disabilities. Geographic and fiscal barriers result in limited resources available to rural schools (e.g., special education personnel or professional development). Shared duties can reduce the stress of special educators wearing "multiple hats." Continued collaboration among all stakeholders allows for more efficacious feelings in supporting students with disabilities both academically and socially in their classes. Even with obstacles, the community and small size of a rural schools provide the potential to create positive outcomes for students with disabilities.

Building upon positive attributes of schools in a rural locale will facilitate inclusive education for students with disabilities. Jung and Bradley (2006) concluded students with disabilities are more likely to have inclusive placements in rural areas compared to students in non-rural areas. However, inclusive education is more than just access to general education environments, and multiple studies indicated that community is an important factor to facilitate inclusion in a rural school (Leigers et al., 2017; Nagle et al., 2006; Short & Martin, 2005; Smoot, 2004). Special education staff who can lead and advocate for this effort is essential. Researchers should explore how to prepare special educators to set high expectations for students and provide modifications and accommodations that allow students to make progress in the general curriculum. Researchers should also pay attention to the role the community plays in a rural school. Smaller populations might allow for individuals to deepen relationships and expand social networks which may facilitate a more inclusive experience for students with disabilities.

### **Missing Narratives**

It is important to note that the “storylines” in this review are the themes found from the literature. Findings from empirical research may highlight what scholars find relevant and what has been prioritized in different socio-political spheres. Completing the narrative about the current state of inclusive rural education includes listening to all voices, especially those who may have been historically marginalized or have repeatedly experienced exclusionary practices. This review of literature provided evidence for the likelihood that students with disabilities will have educational placements in rural general education classes; however, this may not be true for all students with disabilities. Bouck (2005) concluded that students with intellectual disabilities in rural areas are often taught a functional or special education replacement curriculum in a self-contained environment. Pennington et al., (2009) found limited specialized staff were available in rural areas to facilitate inclusion for students with ESN. Limited staff with the knowledge and skills to teach students with ESN might create barriers for providing a meaningful and positive school experience for all students with disabilities in rural areas. For example, it is not clear if more specialized services or personnel (e.g., vision specialist) are more difficult to provide in rural schools so this may create greater

inequalities in access to inclusive education for students who require certain extensive supports. Although, generally, research reports positive outcomes of students with disabilities in rural areas, in future research it will be essential to provide descriptive characteristics of students to compare outcomes between students who require less or more extensive supports.

Out of the reviewed studies, only two (Short & Martin, 2005; Smoot, 2004) utilized surveys or questionnaires to directly ask students with disabilities how they perceived inclusive practices in their rural school. Reprehensive stereotypes and negative social constructs of disabilities have historically excluded the voice of individuals with disabilities (Smith-Chandler & Swart, 2014). The addition of student voice could contribute to the missing narrative of the reviewed research and bring equity to the discussion of disability, belonging, and inclusion.

Additionally, findings suggest that shared responsibility among school staff is important to the implementation of inclusive practices. Often, few special education teachers work in a rural school or throughout the entire district. While this may be perceived as a personnel shortage, there are fewer students with disabilities who receive services in rural schools, so there is a greater ratio of special education staff to students in rural schools (Pennington et al., 2009). But a limited number of students may not justify establishing separate special education classes and this increases the likelihood students with disabilities are taught in general education. Natural distribution of students with disabilities in rural schools usually increases the number of classes a special education teacher needs to work in across the district. Because special education teachers might not always be physically present in classes, they might assume a leadership role to help facilitate shared responsibility in supporting students with disabilities. When special educators become leaders in a rural school, opportunities for school-wide change increase, especially when it comes to promoting inclusive education practices (Collins et al., 2017).

### **Finding a New Narrative**

While the current body of research has identified a narrative which contributes to an overall understanding of inclusive education in rural schools, it is still not quite clear what the day-to-day experiences of inclusion are like in a rural school,

especially for those students with extensive support needs. The current storyline of research on rural inclusive education also does not indicate why there may be more inclusion in rural setting. Below we outline three new narratives as implications for future research to complete the narrative of rural inclusive education for students with ESN: (a) the narrative of students with ESN, (b) the narrative about students with ESN, and (c) the narrative of Least Restrictive Environment.

### ***Narratives of Students with Extensive Support Needs***

The lack of student voice represented in the narrative of current research is concerning, especially considering the perceptions about inclusive education in rural schools are generally positive. Using narrative inquiry in future research will seek to find a new narrative which belongs to students with extensive support needs. The background and landmark events in students' lives contribute to the analysis of the historical implications of inclusive education in rural schools (Linde, 1993). Cole and Knowles (2001) emphasize the connection between one's life and context. Interviewing students directly will allow deeper understanding in the connection between the student's lives and their sense of belonging.

### ***Narratives About Students with Extensive Support Needs***

Teacher perspectives about inclusive education have comprised most of the current narrative about rural inclusive education. While this perspective was generally positive, findings from research still allude to a polarizing view between special and general education teachers of how to best educate students with disabilities. This is especially true when low expectations are held by staff about students with extensive support needs (ESN). Other research has shown school staff may have deficit-oriented views about abilities, which makes students with ESN especially susceptible to biased decision making, limiting their educational experiences (Ruppar et al., 2018). Therefore, it is important to discover what the narrative about students with ESN is in rural schools and communities.

Interviews with teachers and other school staff account for most of the data sources constructing the current narrative of students with ESN. However, other individual narratives can contribute to the data for future research. Family members and peers of

students with disabilities were not often participants in the studies included in this review. Additionally, no studies were found which included community members as participants. Narratives of school staff, families, peers, and community members will be important to capture when piecing together the full narrative about students with ESN in rural schools and communities.

### ***Narratives of Least Restrictive Environment***

Research suggests students with disabilities are more likely to access general education spaces and content in rural areas. The current research narrative demonstrates the difficulty of accessing resources in rural schools, which are necessary to implement inclusive practices. The importance of collaboration between general and special educators is also evidenced in the reviewed studies. While teacher collaboration is not necessarily rural-specific, the implications apply to the rural context because students with disabilities are more likely to be placed in general education classes. In turn, this increases the likelihood of students with ESN to receive instruction from a general education teacher in the rural setting. In addition, special educators often wear "multiple hats" and have caseloads that require them to work across multiple settings in the district, which may decrease direct instruction from special education teachers. Educators' perceptions about inclusive education are one of the most important factors for successful implementation; however, the contrasting views of special and general educators in rural schools could be polarizing (Hammond & Ingalls, 2003; Shoulders & Krei, 2016). Combined with unclear shared responsibilities (Martin et al., 2003), Least Restrictive Environment decisions for students with ESN could be left up for interpretation and potentially could result in more restrictive placements than necessary (McCabe et al., 2020).

### **Conclusion**

Generally, studies have discussed the organizational characteristics (e.g., placement decisions or personnel arrangement) of schools, but not the socio-cultural factors that might influence schools' ability to provide inclusive education for students with disabilities. Even though students with disabilities are more likely to receive general education placements in rural schools (Bouck, 2005; Brock & Schaefer, 2015; Jung & Bradley, 2006), there still appears to be a disproportionate access to general education content for students with extensive

support needs (Bouck, 2005; Pennington et al., 2009). Moreover, no studies clearly identified how LRE decisions are made or if the full continuum of placements exists in rural schools. There is little research about LRE decision making, but available evidence suggests it can be subjected to biased decision making (McCabe et al., 2020) and related to cultural beliefs about disabilities (Sauer & Jorgensen, 2016). Future research should explore the aspects of rurality and through a critical perspective and determine how locale and spatial injustices (Soja, 2010) influences LRE decisions for students with extensive support needs in rural areas.

In a recent theoretical essay, Biddle et al. (2019) discuss new ways which contributions can be defined

in the field of rural education. They argue that rural scholars can contribute “to the broader understanding of education and social context” (p. 12). To that end, the characteristics of rural schools can contribute to a broader understanding of how best to educate students with disabilities who require extensive supports across all school locales. Because the dominant narrative of school privileges the structures and experiences of sub/urban education, it is easy, even as rural researchers, to find ourselves believing that the rural work we do is only important for rural spaces. However, as the findings of the current review suggest, rural schools and scholarship is crucial for understanding education in all school spaces.

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