What Exactly Is *Good* Rural Research? Using a Content Analysis-Informed Literature Review to Illuminate a Path Toward Stronger Rural Social Studies Scholarship

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To support preservice teacher education and in-service professional development for rural social studies teachers, I examine the degree to which rural teachers, students, and communities are reflected in social studies education research. I first developed a theoretical framework for analyzing the rural research quality in the articles I found. I then identified 70 research articles in social studies education that intersect with rural education. Using my theoretical framework, I used content analysis methods to review these 70 articles and classify them based on (a) each article's quality of rural analysis and (b) the facets of social studies education each article examined (e.g. elementary social studies, civics, preservice teachers). Based on these analyses, I provide several suggestions for social studies education researchers looking to conduct meaningful rural research. I also outline several facets of social studies education in need of (more) urgent investigation in rural contexts. In addition, I discuss a few areas in need of future consideration by rural education researchers looking to improve the quality of rural education scholarship more broadly.

In 2016, endless news reports credited (or blamed) "rural America" for the election of Donald Trump (e.g., Evich, 2016). During the subsequent 2020 and 2024 election cycles, urban-rooted journalists, political scientists, and think tanks raced to learn more about why rural Americans seemed so fixated on a leader who seemed to know so little about where they lived (e.g., Schaller & Waldman, 2024; Schulman & Baum, 2023). Such wonderings also trickled to civic educators, who declared that rural America was full of "civic deserts" of uninformed rural youth who were underprepared to participate in U.S. democracy (e.g., Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, 2018; Kawashima-Ginsberg & Sullivan, 2017; Kay & Kalkar, 2020). Meanwhile, I sat in my classroom in a very rural, very conservative Arizona town as the only teacher responsible for teaching 150 middle and high school students how to think critically and creatively about the world around them using history, economics, geography, and civics. I recognized the power of these social studies disciplines to help my students be their best selves and combat the erosion of U.S. democracy. Yet when I revisited the research I studied during my teacher training, I found nothing that spoke to the dilemmas I faced in rural schools.

Burton et al. (2013) made it clear that the dearth of rural social studies research I encountered was very real and important to address because social studies "allow[s] students to examine their own beliefs, perceptions, and experiences while also exploring different cultures, perspectives, beliefs, and experiences" (p. 10). Burton et al. (2013) also recognized that rural classrooms could not be detailed by the same brush used to depict education in nonrural schools, calling for any expansions in rural education literature to simultaneously recognize the uniqueness, assets, *and* challenges seen across the many types of rural communities in the United States. For instance, on the one hand, rural schools have been shown to provide deeper connections to both community and the natural world (Azano et al., 2021; Marietta & Marietta, 2021; Tieken, 2014) and provide students with more opportunities to discuss political ideas than their nonrural counterparts (Conover & Searing, 2000;

Lay, 2006; Moffa, 2019). On the other hand, while such policies are not exclusive to rural areas, rural resentment of urban power (Cramer, 2016) and complex relationships with whiteness in the rural United States (Lensmire, 2017) often create political climates emphasizing the adoption of "divisive concepts" policies, book bans, and anti-CRT legislation in rural communities and states with high rural populations (Gallagher et al., 2021; Hextrum et al., 2022). Thus, to effectively implement anti-oppressive pedagogies and teach about "divisive" concepts in rural classrooms, research should specifically explore teaching and learning social studies within rural political and cultural dynamics.

To be sure, a few scholars do effectively explore the teaching of social studies with respect to both rural assets and challenges. For instance, Moffa (2019, 2020, 2022) explored the importance of rural teachers' analyzing their own perceptions of the communities where they teach. He found that such self-explorations helped teachers to guide their students to process the assets and limitations of their communities through civics courses (Moffa, 2019) and through a better understanding of their community's position in a globalized world (Moffa, 2020). Conversely, Moffa (2022) also explored the negative outcomes that occurred when one history teacher taught about enslavement in her "neo-Confederate" space with little understanding of her community's political context. While Moffa's work provides a high-quality foundation for rural social studies scholarship, it largely centers on civic and global education in Appalachia. Yet the needs of rural schools differ greatly from one region to another, and there are many other facets of social studies education left unexamined by Moffa's work.

Thus, this study builds upon the foundation Moffa (2019, 2020, 2022) has constructed for rural social studies education by asking two questions:

1. To what extent does social studies education literature reflect the experiences of rural teachers and students?
2. In what areas do social studies education scholars need to conduct research to support the needs of rural social studies teachers?

I begin by reviewing how rural education scholars define high-quality research, through which I develop a theoretical framework for evaluating the quality of rural education analysis in social studies education literature. From there, I review social studies education literature and analyze how different facets of social studies education (e.g., elementary social studies, civics, preservice teachers) are explored by various quality levels of rural education research. Ultimately, I discern which facets of social studies education literature (if any) have strong foundations in rural education

research; describe where gaps remain in rural social studies education; and discuss the implications of these gaps for the future vitality of rural (social studies) teachers, students, and researchers.

Theoretical Framework

Rural education researchers commonly lament the plethora of studies that position themselves in rural communities but do not further explore the role of rurality in their findings. Such studies are not as helpful to rural students, teachers, schools, and communities as studies that are more intentionally grounded in rurality. Thus, simply conducting an inventory of all social studies research set in rural locations was not enough for the present study. Rather, I needed to understand the different ways in which social studies scholars can position their work in rurality and analyze the ways in which they do (and do not) ground their findings in rurality. In this section, I describe the current arguments of scholarship that defines high-quality rural research. Next, I describe how I used that scholarship to construct a framework for analyzing the quality of rural theorization in the rural social studies articles I identified.

Debating the Requirements of Quality Rural Scholarship

Arnold et al. (2005) conceptualized two types of rural education literature: "rural specific" and "rural context only." "Rural specific" studies are "specifically aimed at understanding a rural education issue" (Arnold et al., 2005, p. 2). In contrast, rural context only studies have "no apparent intent to investigate a rural education issue or explain how rurality influences some aspect of schooling; these types of studies occurred only incidentally in rural contexts" (Arnold et al., 2005, p. 2).

Coladarci (2007) made several recommendations for increasing the quality of "rural specific" studies. One recommendation was to describe "the rural context of research" (Coladarci, 2007, p. 2). Establishing rural context recognizes the many ways in which rurality can be perceived across people and regions, overcoming the stereotype equating rurality with white[1] conservatism. Describing a study's rural context also facilitates creating a working definition of "rural" that fits the unique circumstances of that study's context.

Another recommendation was for scholars to make a "rural argument" with their findings (Coladarci, 2007, p. 3). Coladarci (2007) explained,

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[1] In this work, I have chosen not to capitalize "white" as a racial group because "whiteness" is merely a social construct (Dumas, 2016) and so as to not perpetuate systems of white supremacy through my language (Matias et al., 2014).

Researchers are not entitled to offer conclusions about rural education just because their research takes place in (or draws on data from) a rural school, community, or region. Rather, researchers must establish warrants, or compelling justifications, for the rural-related conclusions they provide. Far too often, it remains unclear whether the researcher has uncovered a rural phenomenon or, instead, a phenomenon that is observed incidentally in a rural setting. (p. 3)

Thus, making a "rural argument" is imperative not only for denoting rural research as truly applicable to rural schools, but also for providing enough grounding for readers to understand the context of a study in relation to their own, different, rural contexts.

More recently, Biddle et al. (2019) argued that Coladarci's (2007) recommendations gatekept valuable scholarship from being submitted and accepted to major rural education journals. Biddle et al. (2019) explained,

Rather than having to make the case that rurality shapes an educational phenomenon in a unique manner, we think that researchers should be able to demonstrate the importance of their research for education in rural contexts. This importance, we posit, need not be unique to rural contexts, but the power dynamics governing that phenomenon should be unpacked with regard to how they may or may not differ with regard to rural space. (p. 10)

Thus, Biddle et al.'s (2019) proposal for revised parameters argued for redefining high-quality rural research as that which is well-grounded in a rural context and demonstrates an understanding of rural schools and communities.

The Importance of Defining Rurality

Arnold et al. (2005), Coladarci (2007), and Biddle et al. (2019) all articulated the importance of establishing a working definition of rural in rural education scholarship, yet scholars have widely demonstrated that rural is defined differently by different government agencies and can be perceived differently by different people in different regions (e.g., Donehower, 2014; Marietta & Marietta, 2021; Thier et al., 2021). Because of this ambiguity, not intentionally defining rurality also risks erasing marginalized people in rural scholarship and leaves the reader responsible for forming their own conceptualizations of rurality (Longhurst, 2021).

As a sense of the complications behind defining rurality, scholars at one university applied three different definitions of rural to determine that anywhere between 15% and 45% of its students were rural, depending on the definition used (Dunstan et al., 2021). The definitions in this study, however, delineated rural and nonrural spaces using county boundaries, which is problematic because many counties—particularly in the U.S. West—are quite large, and incorporate both urban and rural communities (Marietta & Marietta, 2021). To account for this challenge, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2021) defined rurality by a locale's distance from urban centers, but this definition is also problematic because defining rurality in relation to its distance from urbanity reinforces coloniality by positioning rural communities at the service of urban communities (John & Ford, 2017; Longhurst, 2021). For this reason, Biddle et al. (2019) called for multifaceted definitions that challenge inherent, urban-rooted perceptions of rurality and recognize the ways in which power is manifested, reified, and challenged in rural spaces. Defining rurality by way of its distance from urbanity is additionally problematic because some definitions define urban centers as large towns with populations as low as 2,500. Many people in towns of that size would consider themselves rural because rurality is a "felt" phenomenon shaped by factors such as culture and perception of isolation, irrespective of population (Azano et al., 2021; Donehower, 2014; Longhurst, 2021; Marietta & Marietta, 2021). Thus, while no definition of rurality is perfect, it is imperative that rural scholarship establish a working definition so that the reader is not left to conceptualize rurality based solely on their own perceptions, experiences, and biases.

Grant et al. (2024) introduced a "rural definition triangulation matrix" as a conceptual framework for understanding different approaches scholars can use to define rurality. In creating this matrix, Grant et al. (2024) recognized the frequency with which scholars rely upon objective government definitions for articulating their sense of rural, but they also explained the importance of triangulating across multiple definitions of rurality, which means that simply relying upon government definitions is insufficient. Grant et al. (2024) also emphasized the importance of describing context as a means for triangulating definitions of rural. They used the example of Lecompte et al. (2022; also included in this analysis) to show how an NCES definition of rural could be triangulated with additional, external descriptions of community context. Ultimately, Grant et al.'s (2024) framework highlighted the freedom rural scholars should feel for relying upon a combination of government definitions, external senses of rural context, site-based perceptions of rural context, and individual perceptions of rural context when conceptualizing a triangulated sense of how their work intersects with rurality. They also highlighted the importance of thick description for providing this triangulated context, calling upon (rural

education) journals to allot researchers additional space to define rurality through thick descriptions of site-based context.

Framework for Conceptualizing Rural Scholarship Quality

I synthesized these understandings of effective rural research into a three-level system that I could use to classify the articles for this study (see Figure 1). Level 1 consisted of rural context only scholarship (Arnold et al., 2005), which was at least partially situated in a rural setting but did not consider rurality a variable in their study or otherwise conduct their research in a rural setting with any intentionality. Level 2 and level 3 scholarship highlighted its rural context for a specific reason. Most often, this reason was articulated through the framing of the study, research question, and/or conclusion. In a few instances (e.g., McDonald, 2021), however, a piece would be classified as level 2 or 3 if the author did not indicate a specific reason for positioning their work in a rural context but clearly positioned rurality as a central component to their research question or aims, particularly through the use of rural in their title, keywords, and/or abstract. Level 2 and level 3 research publications were differentiated by the degree to which they met Coladarci's (2007) and Biddle et al.'s (2019) expectations of high-quality rural scholarship. To distinguish between articles as level 2 or level 3, I distilled their expectations into three criteria for high-quality rural education scholarship, each outlined in the following paragraphs. Level 2 scholarship did not meet more than one of these criteria, whereas level 3 scholarship met at least two. Note, however, that articles meeting one or more of these criteria could still be classified as level 1 if they did not outline a specific reason for situating their work in a rural setting.

Expectation 1: Defining Rurality

For the first expectation, I articulated three acceptable approaches for defining rurality. Recognizing Coladarci's (2007) sense that many rurally situated studies occurring outside rural education spaces lack any definition of rurality, the first ("good") approach required merely adopting and briefly explaining a single-faceted definition. This approach recognizes that any definition for rurality—even the most basic of definitions—acknowledges the subjectivity of interpreting rurality. In contrast, the second ("better") approach recognized Grant et al.'s (2024) sense that strong senses of rural are triangulated across multiple definitions. As such, the rural definitions following this second approach could be positioned on Grant et al.'s (2024) matrix. The

third ("best") approach reflected Biddle et al.'s (2019) call for rural scholars to explicitly use multifaceted definitions of rurality to challenge the colonizing and urban-centric power structures reified by traditional definitions of rurality.

Expectation 2: Describing Rural Context

The second expectation is grounded on the principle that thick, asset-based descriptions of rural context are essential for educators to effectively implement rural research in their classrooms (Longhurst, 2021). Thick descriptions provide a detailed, often ethnographic account of a phenomenon not just to understand the phenomenon itself, but also to understand the necessary context that provides the phenomenon with most of its meaning (Geertz, 1973). Thick description is especially important in rural research because it allows readers to navigate the subjectivity of rurality and construct contextual understandings of rurality that help them imagine how one study's findings could shed light on similar phenomena in different rural contexts. While Longhurst (2021) demonstrated that thicker descriptions of rurality make research more meaningful, I considered a study to have described rural context if at least one distinct paragraph was allotted for describing the people and place of a rural community in a multifaceted way.
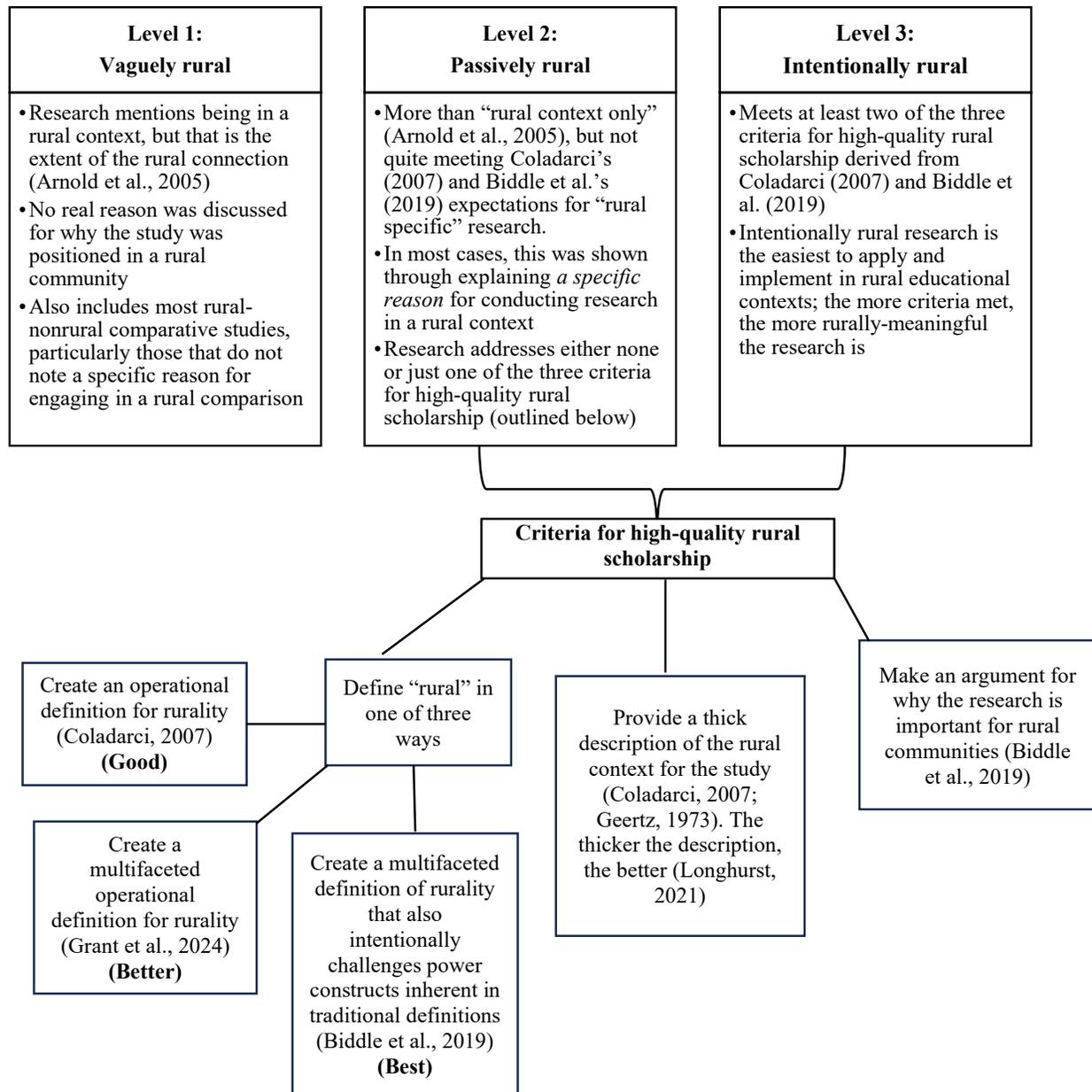
Expectation 3: Arguing Importance for Rural Communities

For the third expectation, I adopted Biddle et al.'s (2019) stance that "rural relevance" is an appropriate bar for ensuring rural scholarship is truly conducted for the benefit of rural schools and communities. I considered a study to be rurally relevant if, in its conclusion, it made at least one argument about how the findings were specifically important to rural schools, students, teachers, or communities. In contrast, if an article mentioned rurality in the title, abstract, or framing for their study but did not discuss rural-specific implications in their conclusion, I did not deem it rurally relevant.

Methods

I began the study by establishing a body of rural social studies scholarship using traditional, "scholastic" literature review methods (Hart, 2018, p. 95). Templier and Paré (2015) broke the literature review process into six stages: (a) formulating the problem, (b) searching the literature, (c) screening for inclusion, (d) assessing quality, (e) extracting data, and (f) analyzing and synthesizing data. The formulated problem for this study centered on my research questions, exploring the intersection of rural and social studies education. To search the literature and screen for inclusion, I conducted two separate rounds of searches,

Figure 1
Quality Classifications for Rural Education Literature

Level 1: Vaguely rural	Level 2: Passively rural	Level 3: Intentionally rural
• Research mentions being in a rural context, but that is the extent of the rural connection (Arnold et al., 2005) • No real reason was discussed for why the study was positioned in a rural community • Also includes most rural-nonrural comparative studies, particularly those that do not note a specific reason for engaging in a rural comparison	• More than "rural context only" (Arnold et al., 2005), but not quite meeting Coladarci's (2007) and Biddle et al.'s (2019) expectations for "rural specific" research. • In most cases, this was shown through explaining *a specific reason* for conducting research in a rural context • Research addresses either none or just one of the three criteria for high-quality rural scholarship (outlined below)	• Meets at least two of the three criteria for high-quality rural scholarship derived from Coladarci (2007) and Biddle et al. (2019) • Intentionally rural research is the easiest to apply and implement in rural educational contexts; the more criteria met, the more rurally-meaningful the research is

Criteria for high-quality rural scholarship

Create an operational definition for rurality (Coladarci, 2007) **(Good)**

Define "rural" in one of three ways

Create a multifaceted operational definition for rurality (Grant et al., 2024) **(Better)**

Create a multifaceted definition of rurality that also intentionally challenges power constructs inherent in traditional definitions (Biddle et al., 2019) **(Best)**

Provide a thick description of the rural context for the study (Coladarci, 2007; Geertz, 1973). The thicker the description, the better (Longhurst, 2021)

Make an argument for why the research is important for rural communities (Biddle et al., 2019)

the first in January 2024 and the second in August 2024. I conducted each round in three stages.

First, I searched *Rural AND "SOCIAL STUDIES"* in the Academic Search Complete, Education Source, Educational Administration Abstracts, ERIC, MasterFile Complete, and Teacher Reference Center databases of EBSCO. In the first round, I reviewed abstracts for the first 200 findings, with few results yielded after the 125th listing. This process yielded 34 articles. In the second round, I reviewed the first

250 findings, with few results yielded after the 200th listing. This round yielded 10 additional articles.

Second, I used the same EBSCO databases to conduct searches in the specific subdisciplines of social studies: geography, economics, government, civics, and history. Searches included "rural and [subject] and education" and "rural and [subject] education" for each of the five subdisciplines. In the first round, I reviewed the first 50 listings produced by each search, except "rural and history

education," which necessitated reviewing the first 100 listings. This process yielded 15 additional articles. In the second round, I reviewed the first 50 listings produced by each search, except "rural and history education," which necessitated reviewing the first 150 listings and "rural and civics education," which necessitated reviewing the first 100 listings. This review yielded six additional articles.

Third, I conducted searches on major social studies- and rural-specific research journals' websites. For the *Journal of Research in Rural Education* and *The Rural Educator*, I searched "social studies," "geography education," "economics education," "government education," "civics education," and "history education." For *Theory & Research in Social Education, Journal of Social Studies Research, Social Studies Research and Practice*, and *The Social Studies*, I searched "rural." In both rounds, I reviewed the first 25 articles for each search result, and the search term had to appear in the title, abstract, or keywords for that article to be reviewed further. These combined searches yielded five additional articles in the first round and no additional articles in the second round.

In all these searches, I limited my parameters to research published in 2001 or later. In the EBSCO database searches, I selected filters to only yield journal articles in my search results. Once search results were provided, I also excluded research focused on rurality outside the United States and articles focused solely on the historical teaching of social studies in the rural United States. The selected articles also had to specifically examine the contemporary teaching or learning of social studies at the K–12 level and had to meet at least level 1 of rural education scholarship (i.e., be at least situated in a rural context). This review excluded higher education articles, some education policy articles that did not have a direct connection to teaching and learning, some articles that discussed social studies only to make comparisons to other subject areas, and social studies research that was not conducted at least partially in a rural setting.

Once I established a final body of 70 articles, I borrowed from content analysis methods (Schreier, 2012) to carry out the remaining steps of literature review outlined by Templier and Paré (2015): evaluating the quality of each article, extracting data from each article justifying the quality rating I assigned, and analyzing and synthesizing my results to construct findings addressing my research questions. Schreier (2012) used a "coding frame" as a construct to describe the parameters through which a content analysis is focused. In this sense, I used my theoretical framework (see Figure 1) as a coding frame through which I could organize articles into three levels of quality for rural education scholarship. With that analysis, I could make broader arguments about the level of rural scholarship

quality within the social studies literature. Next, I classified the resultant literature into various facets of social studies education (e.g., elementary social studies, civics, preservice teachers)—predominantly determined through keywords, abstracts, and titles—to make arguments about the quantity and quality of rural research within each of those facets.

I should also note that my background in rural education shaped both my motivation for initiating this study as well as the ways in which I analyzed the studies herein. I taught middle and high school social studies in rural northern Arizona for almost 10 years before returning to graduate school with the explicit goal of helping rural social studies teachers to better support their students. The two rural communities where I taught were adversely impacted by white supremacy: One school had a 99% Indigenous student population, and the other had a 50% Latine population. Both schools also received Title I funding, and 100% of students at both schools qualified for free lunch. Thus, my perception of rurality is strongly correlated with both colonization and racial diversity, which I acknowledge is not the case for many people, including some education scholars and some rural community members. I was also a secondary teacher, which may have subconsciously impacted the ways in which I sought and analyzed elementary scholarship. I am also a white, straight, cisgender man, which may have impacted the ways in which I sought and analyzed studies pertaining to race, gender, and sexuality. Regardless of these inherent biases, my goal was to identify studies that acknowledged or amplified any notion of rurality in order to recognize ways in which social studies teaching and learning can be transformational for all rural students, teachers, schools, and communities.

Findings

In this section, I describe my analysis of the 70 resultant articles for this study. I begin by exploring trends in the resultant articles classified at levels 1, 2, and 3. I then explore how rurality is represented in different facets of social studies education.

Representation of Rurality in Social Studies Scholarship

This section explores trends among literature classified at level 1, level 2, and level 3. I use a few examples from the resultant literature to illustrate each trend I describe. Appendices A, B, and C detail the literature classified at level 1 (vaguely rural), level 2 (passively rural), and level 3 (intentionally rural), respectively. The appendices also list the social studies topics explored by each article. For levels 2 and 3, the appendices further indicate whether articles met each of the three criteria for high-quality rural scholarship (see Figure 1).

Level 1: Vaguely Rural

I classified just over half the resultant articles at level 1. While a few of these pieces mentioned "rural schools" as a keyword or mentioned a rural setting in the abstract, only two of these 36 pieces mentioned the term rural in their title. While none of these pieces explicitly claimed a rurally driven motive for their research, most described their context as rural without providing a clear explanation of how they determined that they were conducting research in a rural setting. Level 1 pieces used a variety of approaches for describing their rural context. Two scholars (Lash, 2023; Van Hover et al., 2016) simply described their contexts as rural without broader contextualization of place. Most, however, described rural in relation to a particular state (e.g.., Ollila & Macy, 2019); region of a state (e.g., Burnett & Cuevas, 2023); geographic region of the country, such as "Southeastern United States" (Waters et al., 2020, p. 46); or cultural region, such as "a rural Appalachian setting" (DeHart, 2020a, p. 182).

Some articles provided a bit more detail to help readers paint a clearer picture of how the authors conceptualized rural. One study described the town's population to give a sense of size (Chapman & Marich, 2021). Another used the community's economic context to provide a tangible sense of what rural looked like in their study: "The town's economic infrastructure was based on a now waning economy and as a result the school district is experiencing declining enrollment" (Fry & Gosky, 2008, p. 129). Another study stated that "the majority of the students live rurally" but did not provide further detail (Satterfield, 2019, p. 84). One study explained, "The Confederate flag controversy provided the organizing theme of a unit that was taught in a working-class poor, majority White, and rural high school in upstate South Carolina" (Schramm-Pate & Lussier, 2003, p. 57).

Eight level 1 pieces only considered rural schools in order to compare the study of a phenomenon to nonrural schools. For instance, Breakstone et al. (2021) analyzed students' abilities to evaluate quality and objectivity in online information, using rural, urban, and suburban geography as one basis of comparison, but they were unique among level 1 scholarship in specifically grounding their understandings of rurality, urbanity, and suburbanity in a specific government definition. While Breakstone et al. (2021) did provide this important definition of rurality, I classified their study as level 1 because they did not note a specific reason for including rural contexts in their analysis.

Failing to thoroughly contextualize rurality leaves the reader to conjure and apply their own interpretation of a study's context through their own biases and assumptions. For instance, different readers may conjure different perceptions of research participants who are based in "the Midwest," "Appalachia," or "upstate South Carolina." Since most level 1 studies did not have a stated goal of exploring a rural-specific question, failing to specifically contextualize rurality had fewer implications. Nevertheless, vaguely contextualizing rurality, even in level 1 studies, has the power to perpetuate tropes of rurality that are grounded in individual biases and assumptions, not in concrete details about unique rural places. Thus, the more specific researchers can be with describing their context, the less likely readers will be to lean upon their own biases for understanding the setting of a study.

Level 2: Passively Rural

Level 2 studies often employed similarly vague contextualizations and definitions of rurality. Unlike level 1 studies, however, level 2 studies were more intentional in purporting to explore rural phenomena. Many level 2 pieces, however, did not explore the rurality they were purporting to explore with much depth beyond that initial framing. Table 1 outlines four articles I use to highlight various ways in which level 2 studies commonly positioned themselves firmly in rurality (beyond rural context only) but then did not follow through to make conclusions specific to rural social studies education. None of these examples defined how they determined their settings were rural. Two of the four used at least a paragraph to describe their rural context, and the other two at least named the state or region of their context. Two used rural education scholarship partially to ground their ideas. Most made rurality a central component of their study by naming rurality in their introductions, research questions, abstracts, titles, and/or keywords, but again, none of the four articles made conclusions specific to rural education, with the minor exception of Washington and Humphries (2011), who made a passing reference to an article about rural teachers' disclosure of political perspectives in the classroom.

Level 2 studies purporting to explore the relationship between social studies and rurality, but ultimately reaching no rural-specific conclusions, have increased power to misrepresent rurality to readers unfamiliar with rural education. Moffa (2019), one of the level 3 articles analyzed in this study, offered this description of Washington and Humphries's (2011) level 2 study: "While purposeful for understanding controversial issue pedagogies, the study did not intentionally investigate place, nor its influence on teachers' gatekeeping, and instead treated its rural setting as a matter of happenstance" (p. 108). Yet Washington and Humphries (2011) named rurality in their title, abstract, and keywords. It is also among the first listings when "rural social studies" is searched on Google Scholar. Thus, it makes sense that their article is widely cited by influential social studies education scholars, several of

Table 1

Comparing Treatment of Rurality Among Four Level 2 Studies

	Halvorsen et al. (2019)	Lee (2006)	McDonald (2021)	Washington and Humphries (2011)
Naming rurality in key elements of article	In abstract. Not in title or research questions. No keywords provided.	In title and abstract. No clear research question or keywords provided.	In title, abstract, and research question. Not in keywords.	In title, abstract, and keywords. Not in research questions.
Reasoning provided for researching rural setting	PD program under analysis was particularly designed for rural teachers. Rural teachers were intentionally recruited for study. Cited study outlining difficulties rural teachers face in acquiring PD. Cited study outlining the importance of place-based education for rural students.	Argued that rural students are at a "relative disadvantage" for their racial and cultural isolation (p. 197). The "all-white rural school culture" serving as the setting was worthy for investigating the effects of an international education program (p. 198).	None described, other than rurality being the context of her teaching career, which was analyzed through this autoethnography.	Minimal, almost rural context only. Cited study on political viewpoint disclosure by rural teachers.
Rural definition	None	None	None	None
Description of rural context	Michigan—no further depth provided. Participants seemed to be recruited from various locations, but this topic was not explicitly discussed.	A "small midwestern district" with a "quite low" socioeconomic status and 40% student eligibility for free or reduced price lunch. "[F]alls short of a typical sense of a 'town'. Many mobile houses ('trailers') and houses are scattered along the state road without a physical sense of a community. There are no fast food restaurants or convenient stores nearby. One has to drive 16 miles to the nearest Wal-Mart for a bottle of aspirin." (pp. 198–199)	"[A] Southern, predominantly Black rural area" (p. 99). No further depth provided.	"[A] rural part of north Florida" (p. 96) and student population as "comprised of predominantly white, rural, socioeconomically disadvantaged students, many of whom expressed racist views—on both 'open' and 'closed' issues—either privately with [the teacher participant] or in classroom discussions" (p. 95).
Implications noted for rural schools or researchers	None	None	None	None, other than a passing reference to the article on rural teacher political disclosure mentioned at the beginning.

whom used the piece to speak about the teaching of race and controversial issues in rural schools (e.g., Ho et al., 2017; Journell, 2011, 2016; Hawkman & Murray-Everett, 2024; Pace, 2021), even though Washington and Humphries (2011) reached no conclusions specific to rurality. To be sure, Washington and Humphries (2011) made significant findings about the inappropriate treatment of race/ism as a "controversial" issue, but they also demonstrated the power of level 2 scholarship to contribute incompletely developed understandings of rurality into the broader body of social studies education scholarship—unless the scholar applying the work is also well versed in rural education and can analyze the work for the depth in which it truly explores rurality.

Level 2 research that depicts rural teaching and learning in deficit ways also runs the risk of not being nuanced by nonrural scholars who are looking to understand rurality without deeply diving into it themselves. While the exact parameters of asset- and deficit-based language lies in the eye of the beholder, I argue that Washington and Humphries (2011) did not use explicitly deficit language to depict rurality. Rather, their lack of rural-specific analysis of the racism they observed in one rural classroom leaves potential for readers to reach deficit conclusions about rurality. Specifically, the authors repeatedly emphasized their rural setting without exploring connections between rurality and racism, reinforcing an inaccurate belief that racism is a problem in rural spaces alone. Lee (2006), however, exemplified the power of level 2 scholarship to explicitly lead readers toward negative perceptions of rurality. Lee (2006) described her research setting as "fall[ing] short" and "without a physical sense of community" (see Table 1). These descriptors seem to be based upon Lee's personal sense of what "communities" and "towns" should look like and fail to acknowledge the innumerable ways in which communities can manifest. Ultimately, depicting rurality in deficit ways—whether explicitly through language usage or by making a rural connection without thorough analysis—sends the message that rurality is to blame for any number of unfavorable or oppressive trends impacting (social studies) teaching and learning. For level 2 scholarship, these messages were often sent without grounding in rural education scholarship or substantiation through analysis of the role rurality played in the phenomena being examined.

In contrast to the articles outlined in Table 1, other level 2 articles concluded with direct implications for rural education, despite not defining rural or describing their rural context. For Milam and Byford (2023), who argued that "the significance of inquiry-based decision-making materials is prevalent among educators within rural schools" (p. 32), the lack of clarity behind how they determined a school to be rural or what that rurality looked like within their Tennessee context made it difficult to discern whether context-specific considerations shaped their participants' perspectives. Similarly, Koudelka (2021) argued that teacher confidence after engaging in action research for a civic education unit created "a space for teachers to leverage increased rigor and reflective opportunities with inclusive material that stretches adolescents beyond their rural experiences" (p. 396). However, the lack of definition for rurality and the lack of context behind the "rural, Midwestern high school" in this study made it difficult to discern the basis on which Koudelka (2021) argued that students needed "a deeper understanding of the world around them" (p. 397) and whether context shaped the teacher's ability to teach this unit and/or students' reception of that unit. Left unnuanced, Koudelka's (2021) argument further perpetuates the trope that rural students need to be introduced to new experiences in ways that "worldly" urban and suburban students do not. Thus, even in articles with rural-specific conclusions, failing to define and contextualize rurality has the power to reinforce rural tropes and makes it more difficult for readers to make meaning from their findings.

Level 3: Intentionally Rural

I classified 19 articles at level 3, 10 of which met all three quality criteria. Six articles did not have at least one paragraph describing their rural context, but all six either were conceptual studies not situated in any one rural setting or made comparisons across different rural communities, making context building more difficult. Three articles did not explain how they determined their community was rural, but they did provide enough context to lessen the chance that readers would use their biases and assumptions to apply their own definitions of rurality.

While 16 of the 19 articles provided some definition of rurality, only two provided a best approach definition of rurality that not only provided a multifaceted definition, but also "complicate[d] rurality by acknowledging the ways in which it defie[d] 'inherent' definition" (Biddle et al., 2019, p. 11). Stanton et al. (2022) outlined a multifaceted definition that synthesized the U.S. Census Bureau's definition of rurality with a context-driven definition of rural schools established by the Montana Legislature. Additionally, however, while establishing their understanding of rurality, Stanton et al. (2022) took multiple paragraphs to establish the relationship between rurality and Indigeneity. In this effort, they not only established a definition of rural that synthesized multiple government definitions, but also explained the ways in which rurality—at least in Montana—is simultaneously Indigenous, challenging dominant narratives of rural land as devoid of Indigenous peoples (RedCorn et al., 2021).

Hawkman and Murray-Everett (2024) also used their definition to challenge dominant perceptions of rurality,

but also exemplified the complications behind establishing strong rural definitions. They cited Tieken (2014) in recognizing that "rural is not most significantly the boundary around it, but the meanings inherent in rural lives, wherever lived" (Hawkman & Murray-Everett, 2024, pp. 221–222). Using this definition, Hawkman and Murray-Everett (2024) explained, "Therefore, we asked participants to share their personal conceptions of rurality, rather than prescribing a definition as outsiders/researchers" (p. 222). Thus, Hawkman and Murray-Everett's sense of whether each participant taught in a rural community was solely dependent on each participant's personal description. Because their sense of each participant's rural context was grounded in single-faceted definitions, they cannot be classified on Grant et al.'s (2024) rural definition triangulation matrix. However, while Hawkman and Murray-Everett's (2024) sense of rural was single-faceted on a micro, participant-by-participant level, the combination of these individual senses of rurality shaped a multifaceted macro-level understanding of all the things that could constitute rural for the authors themselves. The nuanced sense of rural presented by the authors was further shaped by a thorough history of the rural United States, which was bolstered by U.S. Census Bureau definitions of rurality. Their definition also intentionally challenged misconceptions of rural as largely white by outlining the role of systemic racism and settler colonialism in shaping what different people understand to be rural. While I ultimately considered Hawkman and Murray-Everett's (2024) macro-level sense of rurality when deciding to classify their definition in the best approach category, I recognize that their selection of rural participants could have been better bolstered through triangulation with participants' thick descriptions of context or with government definitions of rurality. For rural scholars seeking to move beyond government definitions, though, it is often unrealistic to provide thick descriptions of rural context in studies comparing phenomena across a dozen or more rural participants and communities.

Representation of Social Studies in Rural Scholarship

Table 2 depicts the number of rural articles that discussed various social studies topics. In determining topics, specific content areas (e.g., U.S. history) were indicated only if the article's findings had a specific implication for that content area. Simply taking place in a particular content area classroom was insufficient to list that content area as a topic being discussed. In addition, I applied the term "pedagogy" for articles exploring a particular teaching strategy or approach for teaching a specific topic. In contrast, I applied "curriculum" for articles exploring how topics or content should be taught on a macro level. Articles were almost always simultaneously categorized across multiple topics.

Using Table 2, I also determined how many articles were at each of the three rural scholarship quality levels, allowing me to see both the presence and quality of rural scholarship in each social studies topic.

Substantially more rural social studies scholarship existed at the secondary level than at the elementary level. Rural scholarship also was more heavily represented in U.S. history, civics, and global studies than in world history, geography, or economics. Much of the work in rural civics and global studies is of higher rural quality. In contrast, quite a bit of the scholarship in rural U.S. history education is of lower rural quality.

The majority of studies exploring specific curricular and pedagogical considerations in rural social studies were only conducted in rural communities by happenstance, without any intent to explore how rurality impacted a phenomenon. This level 1 scholarship provides opportunities for scholars to revisit studies specific to topics such as English language arts integration and historical thinking skills to see if rural context is not just happenstance, but a variable with a direct impact on teaching and learning. However, one exception to this trend of lower-quality curricular and pedagogical work was a modest presence of level 3 scholarship that explored the teaching of race, diverse cultures, and culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) in rural spaces. Stanton et al.'s (2022) work on the incorporation of Indigeneity in rural social studies classrooms and Hawkman and Murray-Everett's (2024) work on the teaching of race by rural social studies teachers of various contexts and backgrounds exemplify well-grounded models for how future rural social studies work should be conducted in this realm.

Discussion

I break this section into three parts. First, I explore my first research question: To what extent does social studies education literature explore the experiences of rural teachers and students? I consider this question by evaluating the overall rural quality reflected in the social studies literature, premised off the notion that research which intentionally defines its sense of rurality, contextualizes its rural setting, and makes rural-specific arguments is inherently exploring the experiences of rural teachers and students with more depth. Second, I explore my other research question: In what areas do social studies education scholars need to conduct research to support the needs of rural social studies teachers? I use Table 2 to address this question, exploring the rates at which high-quality rural scholarship has been published in different facets of social studies education. Third, I conclude with a few broader implications for rural education research, recognizing the power of my theoretical framework to clarify previous calls for high-quality rural education scholarship (Arnold et al., 2005; Biddle et al.,

Table 2

Quality of Rural Research in Various Topics of Social Studies Education

Topic of social studies scholarship	Number of social studies articles per quality level of rural scholarship			
	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Total
Grade level				
Elementary	8	1	4	13
Secondary	21	10	8	39
Subdiscipline				
U.S. history	9	3	2	14
World history	1	1	0	2
Geography and global studies	3	1	4	8
Civics	7	3	8	18
Economics	0	1	1	2
Teacher education				
Preservice teacher education	0	1	4	5
Professional development (PD)	1	5	2	8
Teacher retention and leadership	0	0	2	2
(Preservice) teacher thinking	5	6	8	19
Pedagogical and curricular considerations				
Historical thinking skills	5	2	1	8
Teaching controversial issues	2	2	1	5
Discussion and deliberation	3	1	0	4
Proposing novel pedagogical approaches	5	1	1	7
Reading strategies	6	1	1	8
English as an additional language (EAL)	3	0	1	4
English language arts (ELA) integration	4	0	0	4
Arts integration	2	1	0	3
STEM integration	4	1	1	6
Intersection of social studies and race	6	4	3	13
Diverse religions and cultures	0	4	2	6
Culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP)	1	4	1	6
Macro-level curriculum suggestions	6	3	4	13
Assessment	2	0	0	2
Total articles analyzed	36	15	19	70

2019; Coladarci, 2007; Grant et al., 2024) and provide a path for deeper exploration of the degree to which scholarship supports rural teachers in other content areas.

Rural Quality in Social Studies Literature

I want to begin by clarifying that there is a role for rural context only scholarship in the social studies literature. Many of the level 1 articles in this study had impactful findings and brought academic research and thinking to rural schools. For instance, while conducting research in a rural classroom, Lash (2023) found that substantial work is needed to prevent the perpetuation of "white innocence" in the social studies curriculum. Of course, had Lash grounded her study in rural theory, she could have explored whether rurality impacted the white innocence that she identified in that rural classroom, and her findings could have held a more direct impact for rural education. However, Lash's findings were impactful even without the rural connection, and by not attempting to make an argument about the role of rurality, she did not misrepresent rural schools and communities and provided an opening for scholars to replicate her work with more intentional rural grounding. Thus, while I argue that level 3 scholarship is more reflective of rural teacher and student experiences and is, thus, more meaningful to rural schools, I do not argue for the elimination of rural context only scholarship.

However, scholarship that proports to explore rural teacher and student experiences without thoroughly grounding their premises in a clear definition of rurality or a thorough description of rural context is not truly taking rural teachers' and students' experiences into account. Rather, such scholarship is often premised on researchers' inherent perceptions of rurality, which are shaped by factors unbeknownst to readers. Additionally, scholarship that names rurality as a central factor in the study without reaching at least some rural-specific conclusions not only fail to explore rural teacher and student experiences but confuse readers with their intentions and often misrepresent or incompletely represent rurality.

Level 3 studies explored rural teaching and learning with the most depth. However, even among these well-grounded studies, one dilemma continuously recurred: how to establish rural context in studies that compare a phenomenon across multiple different rural communities. In other words, how can intra-rural comparison studies simultaneously paint a picture of the multiple rural contexts that participants occupy (e.g., J. S. Clark, 2017)? Studies that at least were able to name the state in which their study occurred (e.g., Harter & Yetter, 2022; Milam & Byford, 2023) provided valuable context for understanding the policy backdrop that potentially impacted teaching and learning. Even better, placing participants in different regions within a state (e.g.,

Jakubowski, 2023) added cultural and geographical details to support readers in painting a sense of context while still protecting participant confidentiality. Ultimately, however, my findings affirm Longhurst's (2021) sense that context is most supportive to rural teachers and researchers when it is thickly described, meaning that even studies crossing multiple contexts need to take as many steps as possible to paint a clear picture of their various rural settings.

If scholars want to conduct research in rural settings, they need to decide whether to leave rurality as simply the context of their work, or if they want to employ rurality as a variable in their study. Rural context only scholarship should be welcomed from authors who choose not to employ rurality as a variable in their study. However, even those studies should explain how they determined that their setting was rural and provide a brief description of context so future scholars have a basis to consider the role rurality could potentially play with that phenomenon. Ultimately, though, any scholarship that employs rurality as a variable should thoroughly reflect the experiences of rural teachers and students by intentionally defining and contextualizing rurality and use their findings to make rural-specific conclusions.

Greatest Needs in Rural Social Studies

While a few social studies scholars, particularly in civic and global education, have explored rurality in meaningful ways, little rural research exists in many other facets of social studies education. Based on my findings in Table 2, I will outline six areas of most urgent need.

Rural Elementary Social Studies

Within age-specific rural social studies scholarship, only 25% ($n = 13$) focused on elementary education, and only four of those pieces were at level 3. Yet research has found that a lack of confidence in social studies content among elementary teachers and a lack of instructional time devoted to elementary social studies significantly impede social studies learning (Heafner, 2018; Lanahan & Yeager, 2008). Elementary teachers, particularly in rural schools, also face a national trend of deemphasizing social studies to make more space for teaching other subjects requiring standardized testing (Ollila & Macy, 2019; Wills, 2007).[2]

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[2] Rodriguez and Swalwell (2023) highlight one strategy for elementary teachers who face calls to deemphasize social studies: integrate reading and writing activities that explore anti-oppressive understandings of social studies during language arts blocks. From this study, Ollila and Macy (2019) and Zhao and Angleton (2022) explore this possibility in rural contexts, but both articles are level 1 and do not explore the role of rurality as a variable in student learning.

Concerns around a lack of time and confidence to teach social studies in rural elementary schools are exacerbated by a greater likelihood that rural elementary teachers teach multiple grades simultaneously and a decreased likelihood of support from professional learning communities (Azano et al., 2021; Biddle & Azano, 2016). Ultimately, more research is urgently needed to support rural elementary teachers with the unique dilemmas they face, and because much of elementary social studies is intertwined with the study of language arts and children's literature, a study that simultaneously explores the quality of rural scholarship in both elementary language arts and social studies could yield a more complete sense of current research.

Race/ism, Culture, and Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

Studies that investigate the teaching of race/ism, culture, and culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP; Ladson-Billings, 1995) are another area that needs additional high-quality rural scholarship. Several level 2 studies (e.g., Gibbs, 2021; McDonald, 2021; Washington & Humphries, 2011) reached significant findings about the teaching of race/ism in rural communities. However, these studies treated rurality as an aside when, in fact, it plays a central role in how rural people perceive race and culture (e.g., Cramer, 2016; Lensmire, 2017; Moffa, 2020). Some level 3 scholarship has tried to unpack the role of rurality with more intentionality. For instance, rural scholars have shown how place-based pedagogy can be used to effectively teach about diverse cultures in rural communities through a global citizenship education framework (e.g., J. S. Clark, 2017; Moffa, 2020; Waterson & Moffa, 2015). Using racial literacy and critical race theory frameworks, Hawkman and Murray-Everett (2024) interviewed a variety of social studies teachers to examine their perspectives on race/ism and their hypothetical applications to the classroom. Such scholarship highlights important foundations off of which rural scholars can more thoroughly explore the relationship between rurality, place-based pedagogy, and the teaching of race and culture.

Teaching About Controversial Issues and "Hard History"

Given the quickly developing impact of anti-CRT or divisive concepts legislation on rural social studies classrooms (Gallagher et al., 2021; Hextrum et al., 2022), more research also needs to be conducted on topics that commonly trigger such legislation. Moffa (2022) demonstrated that the teaching of "hard history" (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2018) also has the power to incite backlash in rural communities, despite well-founded concerns behind presenting race/ism as controversial (Washington & Humphries, 2011). While Hawkman and Murray-Everett's (2024) work explored both teacher perspectives on race/ism and its "controversy" in rural communities, Moffa (2022) more deeply focused on the ways in which one rural, neo-Confederate context shaped the thinking and decision making of a teacher who had thought little about the "controversy" behind teaching about race/ism. Yet while race/ism does sometimes intersect with controversial topics, particularly in some rural spaces (Moffa, 2022), I separately argue for research exploring race/ism and controversial issues because little scholarship exists exploring the ways in which rural contexts shape the teaching of other hard or controversial topics, such as queer history and rights, genocide, and presidential elections.

World History

I identified only two pieces of rural scholarship in world history, and neither of these pieces was level 3. This shortfall is significant because the ways in which students conceptualize world history influence their perceptions of contemporary global citizenship (Brooks, 2011). Ross (2023), a world historian who teaches at a rural university extension campus, argued,

> [O]ffering robust world history education to [college] students in rural areas can help teachers in training be more inclusive and less Eurocentric in their historical understanding…. As world historians, we can provide a relevant historical experience for an often overlooked diverse student body, and inspire students to seek an authentic collective identity that transcends regionalism or nationalism. Perhaps most crucial in this time of increasing social divisions, understanding world history can foster a sense of historical empathy to help students understand what it means to be human. (pp. 1–2)

While scholarship in rural world history education is nearly nonexistent, scholarship intersecting global studies with rural education (e.g., Moffa, 2020) could serve as a starting point for researchers to pose questions around the teaching of world history in rural communities.

Economics

Rural economics education faced a similar shortfall to world history, which is significant because understanding economic principles is essential for students and teachers to understand their rural places (e.g., Cramer, 2016; Schafft et al., 2010; Tieken, 2022). The intersection of rural education and economics also presented numerous outlets for deficit thinking in rural social studies scholarship. For instance,

Twyman et al. (2003) described the rural context for their level 3 piece as "still timber dependent, which contributes to a 10% higher unemployment rate than in the rest of the state" (p. 262). This (often nonrural) perception that rural communities should have already moved beyond economic dependence on natural resource extraction parallels the "wicked problems" framework Moffa (2019) used to better understand a "paradox of place" faced by rural civics teachers. On one hand, connecting the civics curriculum to local rural communities made students better able to visualize vibrant futures in their communities. On the other hand, teaching civics in meaningfully place-based ways inherently highlighted civic, economic, and other limitations of their rural spaces that, at times, contributed to students' decision making on whether to leave their communities upon graduation. Because perceptions of economic vitality are often intertwined with rural peoples' civic attitudes and community perceptions, additional scholarship into rural economics education that parallels current work in rural civics education is necessary to establish a multifaceted foundation upon which rural social studies teachers can prepare their students to deeply and critically imagine potential futures both within and outside their rural communities.

Rural Social Studies Teacher Education

It is meaningless to explore rural teachers' curricular and pedagogical thinking and decision making if we do not also explore how rural-bound teachers can be best prepared to make pedagogical and curricular decisions. In fact, teacher preparation and retention are the primary means through which issues of rurality in curriculum and pedagogy are addressed by the National Rural Education Association's (2022) Rural Research Agenda. Only a few pieces in this study explored the preparation of rural-bound social studies teachers (e.g., J. S. Clark, 2017; Stanton et al., 2022; Todd & Agnello, 2006). Moffa's (2022) study of the early career teacher who taught hard history in the rural South demonstrates the specific nuances social studies adds to broader conversations about rural teacher preparation, recruitment, and retention. Teachers such as the one in Moffa's (2022) study could have benefited from at least a unit of study in rural education during her content area methods courses, if not a dedicated rural education course or program with social studies-specific considerations integrated within. While the need has been suggested for teacher preparation programs to intersect rural context with content-specific pedagogical knowledge (e.g., Azano, 2011; Oliver & Hodges, 2014; Petrone & Wynhoff-Olsen, 2021), no recent research has conducted an inventory of scholarship available to support the teaching and learning of rural students for specific content areas. The goal of this study is to both provide that inventory for social studies and provide a theoretical framework for scholars in other content areas to develop an inventory of current rural research that can be of use to rural teachers and teacher educators.

Implications for Rural Education Scholarship

I also want to discuss a few implications this study has for rural research beyond the realm of social studies. First, this study further demonstrates the power of asset-grounded rural education literature and the harm of studies that approach rurality from a deficit-based lens (Biddle & Azano, 2016; Reagan et al., 2019). Acknowledging rural community assets made some level 3 pieces even more compelling than otherwise demonstrated by my theoretical framework (e.g., LeCompte et al., 2022, p. 33; Waterson & Moffa, 2016, p. 214). Likewise, research using deficit-oriented language and tones left readers with cause to (further) question the degree to which thoroughly examining rurality as a variable was a central goal (e.g., Lee, 2006; Twyman et al., 2003). Admittedly, because perceptions of assets and deficits vary from one reader to another, my theoretical framework did not deeply engage with asset language as a criterion for high-quality rural scholarship. Rural scholars should explore and provide nonrural researchers with guidance on what constitutes asset and deficit language because scholarship that implicitly or explicitly depicts rurality in negative ways does not truly reflect the experiences of rural teachers and students, even when rural teachers and students are themselves incorporated into the study.

Second, this study demonstrates a need for rural scholarship to further articulate how Coladarci's (2007) call for establishing rural context should be met in pieces comparing phenomena across different settings. Some of these comparisons were made between rural and nonrural settings, which Biddle et al. (2019) affirmed as important work. Other comparisons were intra-rural, comparing phenomena across different rural settings both within and across states. In both rural-nonrural and intra-rural comparison studies, authors often struggled to provide a helpful amount of context because research occurred across multiple settings. I argue that, as a minimum, the state(s) in which research is conducted should be named, allowing readers to understand the policymaking context for the research. When possible, integrating an understanding of different regions within states (e.g., Jakubowski, 2023) would allow authors to understand rural context more deeply while still protecting the confidentiality of research participants. However, given my agreement with Longhurst's (2021) recommendation that thicker descriptions of context are typically better, the process for describing the multiple (rural) contexts in comparative studies needs to be explored further.

Third, this study demonstrates a need for rural scholars to more deeply consider Biddle et al.'s (2019) call to embrace multifaceted definitions of rurality that challenge dominant narratives. Stanton et al.'s (2022) intersection of rurality with Indigeneity and Hawkman and Murray-Everett's (2024) intersection of rurality and race were the only two articles approaching this goal. While these pieces established excellent foundations for preventing the continued adoption of white-centric notions of rurality that erase rural People of Color, these definitions only embraced two approaches for complicating rurality and only appeared in two of the present study's 70 articles. This trend demonstrates the need for additional clarity and models for how to define rurality in ways that challenge its inherent perception by those outside rural spaces.

Finally, this study raises questions about the conditions set by the venues available for scholars to publish educational research. Crafting articles that meet all three criteria of high-quality rural research requires significant length that is often not allotted by journals with limited space. While the increasing presence of online journals is slowly opening flexibility for some editors to allow longer submissions, many editors still face difficulties in persuading reviewers to read longer manuscripts. Additionally, outside rural education spaces, many editors are unaware of studies such as Coladarci (2007), Biddle et al. (2019), or Grant et al. (2024), which established guidelines for high-quality rural education research. Work should be done to help journal editors across education exercise flexibility for manuscripts made lengthier by thick descriptions of rural context and hold authors accountable for how they speak to rurality in their work.

Conclusion and Future Directions

Rural and social studies education scholars need to work toward putting more high-quality research in the hands of rural social studies teachers. When I was a rural social studies teacher, research such as Moffa (2019) or LeCompte et al. (2022) could have shown me how to understand the rurality I lived in, empower my students to see the assets of their tight-knit communities, help my students identify the knowledges necessary to make their communities stronger, and explicitly speak against the narrative that teaching students about our past and present serves only to paint a future best lived outside rural spaces. Likewise, research such as Hawkman and Murray-Everett (2024) and Stanton et al. (2022) would have helped me to better recognize and name the presence of racialized people in my rural place, giving me language to persuade administrators, parents, and students that discussing race/ism is not controversial, but irremovable from the study of the past, present, and future of their rural communities. The high-quality level 3 rural

social studies literature we do have—much of which has only come out in the last few years—tells us that effectively teaching social studies in rural spaces requires *understanding* rurality, and not blaming it for unfavorable and oppressive trends impacting (social studies) teaching and learning. Yet too much literature—much of which has also been published in the last few years—claims to understand rurality without truly doing so. Continuing to allow the publication of this level 2 literature further perpetuates rural resentment toward educational institutions (see Cramer, 2016). May this study illuminate a path toward social studies research that better supports rural teachers, students, and community members in working together to amplify rural strengths and identify opportunities for future growth.

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Appendix A: Level 1 (Vaguely Rural) Social Studies Education Scholarship

Author(s)	Year	Title	Facet(s) of social studies
Bludau	2006	Introducing Service Learning to a School: Engaging Students, Teachers, and Community Members in Meaningful Projects	Civics
Breakstone et al.*	2021	Students' Civic Online Reasoning: A National Portrait	Secondary; civics
Brooks	2011	Historical Empathy as Perspective Recognition and Care in One Secondary Social Studies Classroom	Secondary; world history; historical thinking; teacher thinking
Burnett and Cuevas	2023	Using Historical Thinking Strategies for Improving Elementary Students' Content Knowledge and Attitudes Towards Social Studies	Elementary; historical thinking; U.S. history
Chandler	2006	Academic Freedom: A Teacher's Struggle to Include "Other" Voices in History	U.S. history; race; teacher thinking
Chapman and Marich	2021	Using Twitter for Civic Education in K–12 Classrooms	Civics; pedagogical approach
C. H. Clark	2018	The Impact of Student Political Identity Over the Course of an Online Controversial Issue Discussion	Secondary; civics; controversial issues; discussion
Choi et al.*	2011	Marginalized Students' Uneasy Learning: Korean Immigrant Students' Experiences of Learning Social Studies	Secondary; race; CRP; curriculum; EAL
De La Paz and Wissinger*	2015	Effects of Genre and Content Knowledge on Historical Thinking with Academically Diverse High School Students	Secondary; U.S. history; historical thinking; reading
DeHart	2020a	"Beating the Bad Rap": A Qualitative Study of Social Studies Educators Using Film	Secondary; ELA integration; pedagogical approach; teacher thinking
DeHart	2020b	"Finding Meaning in Life": Exploring Personal Narratives in Film and Social Media-Based Teaching	Secondary; ELA integration; pedagogical approach; teacher thinking
Dull and Murrow*	2008	Is Dialogic Questioning Possible in Social Studies Classrooms?	Secondary; historical thinking; discussion
Feucht et al.	2023	"We Will Probably Figure It Out Eventually": How Secondary Students Read and Comprehend News Articles about Illiteracy	Secondary; civics; reading
Freedman	2020	When Discussions Sputter or Take Flight: Comparing Productive Disciplinary Engagement in Two History Classes	Secondary; U.S. history; discussion
Fry and Gosky	2008	Supporting Social Studies Reading Comprehension with an Electronic Pop-up Dictionary	Reading; secondary; EAL

Author(s)	Year	Title	Facet(s) of social studies
Hartman and Kahn	2017	Start Local, Go Global: Community Partnerships Empower Children as Scientists and Citizens	Elementary; STEM
Lash	2023	Racial Individualism in Middle School: How Students Learn White Innocence through the Social Studies Curriculum	Secondary; U.S. history; race; curriculum
Lisenbee et al.	2015	Geocaching Is Catching Students' Attention in the Classroom	Elementary; geography; STEM
Martin et al.	2017	E Pluribus Unum: Mohawk Indian Students' Views Regarding the U.S. Pledge of Allegiance	Secondary; civics; race
Ness	2009	Reading Comprehension Strategies in Secondary Content Area Classrooms: Teachers Use of and Attitudes Towards Reading Comprehension Instruction	Secondary; reading; teacher thinking
Ollila and Macy	2019	Social Studies Curriculum Integration in Elementary Classrooms: A Case Study on a Rural Pennsylvania School	Elementary; ELA integration
Osborne et al.*	2020	An Assessment of Geospatial Technology Integration in K–12 Education	Geography; STEM
Park and Braud	2017	The Effects of Multimedia Content Design Modalities on Students' Motivation and Achievement in History	Secondary; U.S. history; arts integration
Roberts and Brugar*	2017	The View from Here: Emergence of Graphical Literacy	Elementary; reading
Satterfield	2019	Is Democratic Learning Possible in a High-Stakes Classroom?	Secondary; curriculum; assessment
Schramm-Pate and Lussier	2003	Teaching Students How to Think Critically: The Confederate Flag Controversy in the High School Social Studies Classroom	Secondary; U.S. history; civics; controversial issues; race
Shepardson*	2019	Students' Conceptions of and Feelings About Land Use: Building a Conceptual Framework for Teaching and Learning About Land Use	Geography; STEM
Summers and Dickinson	2012	A Longitudinal Investigation of Project-Based Instruction and Student Achievement in High School Social Studies	Secondary; pedagogical approach; EAL
Swanson et al.*	2016	Literacy and Text Reading in Middle and High School Social Studies and English Language Arts Classrooms	Secondary; reading
van Hover et al.	2016	From Source to Evidence? Teachers' Use of Historical Sources in Their Classrooms	U.S. history; historical thinking
Waid	2017	Flipping the Twenty-First-Century Social Studies Classroom	Secondary; pedagogical approach
Waters et al.	2020	Examining Testing and Growth Mindset in High School Social Studies Students	Secondary; assessment

Author(s)	Year	Title	Facet(s) of social studies
Weeks	2003	On the Trail of History in Montana: Crossing Great Distances of Time and Place, Six Rural Teachers and Their Students Plunge Together Into the Enduring Lessons of Lewis and Clark	U.S. history; PD; curriculum
Wills	2007	Putting the Squeeze on Social Studies: Managing Teaching Dilemmas in Subject Areas Excluded From State Testing	Elementary; curriculum
Wills and Sandholtz	2009	Constrained Professionalism: Dilemmas of Teaching in the Face of Test-Based Accountability	Elementary; curriculum
Zhao and Angleton	2022	Critical Identity Literacy with Young Learners: Exploring Gender and Race at the Intersection of Social Studies and Visual Arts	Elementary; race; arts integration; ELA integration

Note. n = 36.
[*] Rural-nonrural comparative study.

Appendix B: Level 2 (Passively Rural) Social Studies Education Scholarship

Author(s)	Year	Title	Facet(s) of social studies	Rural definition	Rural context described	Rural relevance explained
Berson et al.	2024	Thinking Critically, Coding Creatively: Elevating Social Studies Through Inquiry-Based Learning and Computer Science Integration	Secondary; pedagogical approach; STEM integration	None	No[***]	No
Braak and Lewin	2015	The Dollar Game Curriculum: Inspiring Wealth Creation in Rural Communities	Economics	None	No[***]	No
Fickel	2005	Teachers, Tundra, and Talking Circles: Learning History and Culture in an Alaska Native Village	PD; diverse cultures; CRP; teacher thinking	None	Yes	No
Gibbs	2021	"Strange Fruit": Teaching the Present and Past of Racial Violence in the Rural South	Secondary; U.S. history; race; CRP; teacher thinking	Good	No[**]	No
Greene et al.	2014	The Educational Value of Field Trips	U.S. history; arts integration	Good	No	No
Halvorsen et al.	2019	Community in Context: Professional Development for Teaching Historical Inquiry	Historical thinking; curriculum; PD	None	No	No
Koudelka	2021	Tapping Teen Power: (Re)positioning Students for Civic Action	Secondary; civics	None	No	Yes
Lee	2006	"Going Global": Conceptualization of the "Other" and Interpretation of Cross-Cultural Experience in an All-White, Rural Learning Environment	Secondary; global studies; diverse cultures	None	Yes	No
Madison	2019	Piloting Journalistic Learning in a Rural Trump-Supportive Community: A Reverse Mentorship Approach	Secondary; civics; controversial issues; PD	None	Yes	No
McDonald	2020	This Ain't What I'm Used To: Reflections of a Black Educator in Rural Black America an Ethnography	Secondary; preservice teacher education; PD; race; CRP; teacher thinking	None	No	No

Author(s)	Year	Title	Facet(s) of social studies	Rural definition	Rural context described	Rural relevance explained
Milam and Byford	2023	Decision-Making Instruction: Rural Teachers' Challenges and Perceptions of Robert Stahl's Decision-Making Materials in the Social Studies Classroom	Secondary; historical thinking; curriculum; teacher thinking	None	No[**]	Yes
Nganga et al.	2021	High School Students of Color in the U.S. Speak About Their Educational Experiences: Schooling, Culture, and Pedagogy	Secondary; race; CRP; curriculum	None	Yes	No
Strickland	2001	Multicultural Literature in Rural Schools: A Social Studies Unit that Promotes Cultural Awareness	Elementary; diverse cultures; reading	None	No	Yes
Washington and Humphries	2011	A Social Studies Teacher's Sense Making of Controversial Issues Discussions of Race in a Predominantly White, Rural High School Classroom	Secondary; civics; U.S. history; controversial issues; race; discussion; teacher thinking	None	Yes	No
Wolpow et al.	2002	Designing, Implementing, and Evaluating a Teacher In-Service Program Enabling 6th–12th Grade Rural Teachers to Integrate Holocaust Studies Into Their Curricula: A Case Study	Secondary; PD; world history; diverse cultures; teacher thinking	None	No	Yes

Note. n = 15.

* Rural-nonrural comparative study.

** Study included multiple participants who were intentionally described as being located in different rural regions, making it more difficult to intentionally explain the context of each research participant.

*** Study was a conceptual paper that did not involve participants from particular rural contexts. Thus, including context was not applicable.

Appendix C: Level 3 (Intentionally Rural) Social Studies Education Scholarship

Author(s)	Year	Title	Facet(s) of social studies	Rural definition	Rural context described	Rural relevance explained
J. S. Clark	2017	Developing Professional Judgment: Preservice Teachers Drawing Upon Rurality to Teach Global Issues in Rural Communities.	Secondary; preservice teacher ed; global studies; curriculum; teacher thinking	Better	No[*]	Yes
Eargle	2013	"I'm Not a Bystander": Developing Teacher Leadership in a Rural School-University Collaboration	Secondary; PD; leadership; curriculum; teacher thinking	Good	Yes	Yes
Gallay et al.	2016	Place-Based Stewardship Education: Nurturing Aspirations to Protect the Rural Commons	Secondary; civics; STEM	None	Yes	Yes
Harter and Yetter	2022	Knowledge is Power in Teaching Economics	Economics; PD	Good	No[*]	Yes
Hartman	2017	Rurally Located Teacher Candidates: Globalizing the Early Childhood Social Studies Curriculum	Elementary; global studies; preservice teacher education; diverse cultures	Good	Yes	Yes
Hawkman and Murray-Everett	2024	Reality and Rationalization: Insights on Rural Teachers' Efforts to Build Racial Literacy	Race; teacher thinking	Best	No[*]	Yes
Howley et al.	2013	How Agricultural Science Trumps Rural Community in the Discourse of Selected U.S. History Textbooks	Secondary; U.S. history; curriculum	Better	No[**]	Yes
Jakubowski	2023	Contemporary Challenges of Teaching Social Studies in Rural Settings: Local & National Dissonance in the Classroom	Historical thinking; curriculum	Good	Yes	Yes
LeCompte et al.	2022	Action Civics in Rural Communities	Elementary; civics	Better	Yes	Yes
Martin and Chiodo	2007	Good Citizenship: What Students in Rural Schools Have to Say About It	Secondary; civics	Good	Yes	Yes
Moffa	2019	A Paradox of Place: Civic Education in the Rural South	Secondary; civics; teacher thinking	Better	Yes	Yes

Author(s)	Year	Title	Facet(s) of social studies	Rural definition	Rural context described	Rural relevance explained
Moffa	2020	Teachers' Perspectives on Global Citizenship Education in Central Appalachia	Global studies; civics; teacher thinking	Better	Yes	Yes
Moffa	2022	Hard History in Hard Contexts: Teaching Slavery and Its Legacy in a Neo-Conservative Space	Secondary; teacher retention; U.S. history; race; controversial issues; teacher thinking	Good	Yes	Yes
Owens	2001a and 2001b	An Examination of Picture Story Books that Teach Children About Appalachia (Parts 1 and 2)	Elementary; reading; diverse cultures	None	Yes	Yes
Stanton et al.	2022	Planning Community-Centered Inquiries: (Re)imagining K–8 Civics Teacher Education With/in Rural and Indigenous Communities	Elementary; civics; preservice teacher education; race; CRP; teacher thinking	Best	Yes	Yes
Todd and Agnello	2006	Looking at Rural Communities in Teacher Preparation: Insight Into a P–12 Schoolhouse	Preservice teacher education; teacher thinking	Good	Yes	Yes
Twyman et al.	2003	Effects of Concept-Based Instruction on an English Language Learner in a Rural School: A Descriptive Case Study	Pedagogical approach; EAL	None	Yes	Yes
Waterson and Moffa	2015	Applying Deweyan Principles to Global Citizenship Education in a Rural Context	Global studies; civics	Better	No**	Yes
Waterson and Moffa	2016	Citizenship Education for Proactive Democratic Life in Rural Communities	Secondary; civics	Better	No**	Yes

Note. n = 19.

* Study included multiple participants who were intentionally described as being located in different rural regions, making it more difficult to intentionally explain the context of each research participant.

** Study was a conceptual paper that did not involve participants from particular rural contexts. Thus, including context was not applicable.