Youth Perspectives of Schooling in a Northern-Ontario Community

Tammy Turega (née Piché)

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of PhD,
Educational Studies

FACULTY OF EDUCATION

LAKEHEAD UNIVERSITY

THUNDER BAY, ONTARIO

Dr. Seth Agbo – Dissertation Supervisor
Dr. Leanne Taylor –Dissertation Committee Member
Dr. Raymond Neckoway – Dissertation Committee Member

2023

Abstract

In Ontario, northern, rural youth face disadvantages due to their geographic location, as the majority of students attending high school, if not relocated to another community for their studies, must endure daily commutes ranging from 60 to 130 kilometers in order to attend classes. Yet, student-youths' perspectives on how their geographic location influences their schooling experiences are currently absent from our understanding of educational equity in northern, rural contexts. While the literature on northern, rural education has focused almost exclusively on teacher, leadership and community perspectives, this study utilized a critical consciousness framework and interpretative phenomenology analysis with photovoice methods to explore youths' perceptions of rural education.

Five participants shared their thoughts and experiences through photovoice, individual interviews and focus groups to explore their rural educational experiences. The objective of this study was to illuminate the barriers to educational success from an equity standpoint and to explore innovative approaches with photovoice to capitalize on the strengths of these students in order to address disparities and to create opportunities for change in educational policy and practice. The findings highlighted some of the ways in which spatial, socio-cultural and physical obstacles to learning affect youth development while emphasizing how the school's climate and teachers contribute to fostering educational equity and a sense of belonging. Findings also revealed that youth encounter numerous challenges in their pursuit of secondary education. However, they manage to overcome these obstacles through the support of their schools, which serve as

safe havens fostering strong relationships within the school community, or by benefiting from a flexible approach to their education.

In the realm of equitable rural education, this study significantly contributes to the existing body of literature. Specifically, the present study implies that educational equity requires a lot of work. It encompasses various aspects, including a willingness to learn, cooperation, sharing of power, finding resources, harnessing creativity and imagination, and adjusting attitudes. Lastly, this study amplifies the voices of youth in the discourse surrounding educational equity in northern, rural schools.

Keywords: rural education; equitable rural education; isolated schools; Rural youth; secondary education; interpretative phenomenological analysis; photovoice.

Dedication

I dedicate this thesis to my children, Cohen John Turega and Nevaeh Elizabeth Turega.

Acknowledgements

I am overwhelmed with joy to reach the final phase of my doctoral journey. I started my doctoral studies at a time where my micro-preemie daughter was in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit. Now I am here, and she is 5. I am glad that I pursued my doctoral journey, and I sometimes wonder how I ever did it. It takes a big village.

First, I would like to thank my supervisor Dr. Seth Agbo. Seth, from the day I emailed you asking you if you would be interested in being my supervisor to the day that I write this, I have never once questioned my decision to choose you. You believed in my potential, and were consistently supportive throughout this journey. Further to that, your stance on educational leaves served me well, because never had I questioned my ability to do it all-parenting, studying and working. It was incredibly challenging, but I wouldn't have done it any other way. I am thankful for my members of my committee, Drs. Leanne Taylor and Raymond Neckoway. My dissertation is made possible because of your incredible input, support and mentorship. Leanne, you are brilliant. You inspire me in many ways. Your feedback on my scholarly thinking at the beginning of my doctoral journey has stuck with me throughout all my subsequent endeavours, and your guidance since then has been invaluable. Raymond, every conversation with you is a treasure. I have taken abundant wisdom from you, which has enhanced not only this dissertation but my life in countless ways. You are incredibly intelligent, calm and thoughtful, some of the most important values.

Second, I would furthermore like to express my most sincere thanks to the "PhD light force". The 2018 cohort is an awesome crew of brilliant and personable colleagues, many of whom I call friends.

Thirdly, I would like to express my most sincere appreciation to my participants. You responded to my posters during a global pandemic, invited me into your school, and gave me the gift of your voices, stories and insights. Thank you to Mr. McFarlane for whom I am forever grateful. You are the epitome of a teacher! Thank you!

Finally, I am thankful for my husband, Josh Turega, and our beautiful children, Cohen and Nevaeh. You are my top three favourite people. I'd like to thank my parents, Robert and Diane. Dad, you never finished high school because you grew up on a farm, and your parents needed your help, but had you had the chance you would have done amazing things in school. Mom, you never quite understood graduate education but I feel your pride and unwavering love for me. My kids have the best grand-maman. To Betty and Danny, thank you for all your love, support and kindness towards taking care of my kiddos so that I could write when Josh was away at work.

Table of Contents

Chapter One: Introduction

Northern, rural education that recognizes how geographic location and isolation impact students is needed to create equity for students (Azano & Biddle, 2019; Stelmach, 2011). This qualitative study explores equity in education from student-youth perspectives in a northern rural and remote Ontario public secondary school context; to identify barriers to educational success in an isolated geographic milieu; and discover novel ways of solving disparities. I chose to solely focus on the perspective of Northern Ontario, rural youth for the following two reasons: one, youth, and especially those in Northern, rural areas, are excluded from our current understanding; and two, a critical examination of their school experiences can provide insider knowledge on creating equity.

Northern, rural schools experience a myriad of barriers due to geographic isolation, limited decision-making power and a higher prevalence of systemic issues such as racism, poverty, and poorer health outcomes to name a few (Budge, 2006; Naeem, 2020). Much of this oppression and disadvantage amplifies the challenges brought upon by remoteness and can present more obstacles that lead to negative academic outcomes for northern, rural youth (Aguliera & Nightengale-Lee, 2020; Stelmach, 2011). Although geographic isolation is beyond the scope of responsibility and solvability for teachers and rural educational leaders (Aguliera & Nightengale-Lee, 2020; Stelmach, 2011), individuals in these communities are not powerless; they are resourceful (Gibson & Gordon, 2018; Stelmach, 2011). For these reasons, the voices and actions of student-participants on equity and inequity are required for teachers and rural educational leaders

to be active agents in bridging the gaps of remoteness and its effects on education (Herbert, 2020). This study adds the voice of youth in the discourse of equitable education in northern, rural schools, but it also disrupts urban-normativity in educational research by sharing research conducted within the northern and rural setting.

The Research

I upheld the values of mutual respect in this research study. As a result, I placed a strong emphasis on upholding the confidentiality of my participants and their context. Hence, I have conscientiously chosen to protect the anonymity of both the community and the selected high school, while recognizing the potential implications of this choice on my capacity to thoroughly delve into the community's intricacies. Without a doubt, this choice affects my ability to unravel extensive contextual information as well as the efforts made by the community to resolve equity issues. Throughout the entire project, I used the words “selected high school”, “community”, as well as “anonymous” to cite the literature, and to describe the context chosen for this study without disclosing identifying information.

The qualitative research study applied an interpretative phenomenology analysis (IPA) methodology, underpinned by a theoretical framework rooted in critical consciousness. This theoretical perspective was chosen because northern rural communities are confronted with multifaceted forms of oppression and their varying intersections. The examples of oppression in rural milieus are a lack of access to basic services, spatial disadvantage, economic marginalization, environmental degradation, cultural imperialism, discrimination, colonization, and political marginalization (Bishop, 2015). I selected IPA methodology for its capacity to facilitate the nuanced interpretation

of participants' experiences, small sample size, and ability to evoke rich data of complex human experience, serving as a means to address the central research inquiry: “How do northern, rural youth ages 15 to 18 years old experience educational equity in a geographically isolated high school?”

In this research context, I combined interpretative phenomenology with Paulo Freire’s critical consciousness theory to interpret the participants’ critical perceptions of equity and subsequent critical action against inequities to amplify their voices for transformation (Freire 1970/2008). While recognizing the epistemological and ideological tensions that inherently exist between IPA and CCT, the integration of these approaches allowed the research to delve deeper into participants' perceptions (Smith & Nizza, 2022). This integration illuminated the intricate ways in which historical and sociopolitical factors mold their experiences of social inequality, ultimately contributing to an unjust society from the perspective of the participants. The disparities in participants' experiences are intricately linked to the multitude of identities they embody and their relative positions of power within the context of these experiences. Furthermore, Freire's work did not furnish a prescriptive framework for the adoption of CCT, and arguably, his theorizing already delineated the power, choice, and knowledge dynamics within rural communities (Freire, 1970/2008).

This research applies CCT as a theoretical framework that centers on the participants' experiences of equity and inequity in rural education and how historical, sociopolitical forces shape existing social inequality as well as provides the space for individuals to respond to these realities through critical reflection and action. This is achieved by amplifying the participants’ voices in their context through interpretative

phenomenology while examining the broader societal structures, institutions, and power relations within their scope of awareness and sphere of influence. It is important to note that this approach differs from the customary structural analysis employed by critical theory, which typically critiques structural, post-structural, historical, and spatial elements (Steffy & Grimes, 1986). In sum, the macro level analysis from critical consciousness theory is constructed on a micro level with participants through the critical reflection, and critical action of their interpretation of experiences of educational equity and inequity.

The participants in the study were five secondary students from a *selected high school* living in a community*,* within Northern, Ontario. I chose this high school because it is located in the heart of the *township* and the diverse student population resembles that of other northern, rural public secondary schools which include French, English, Indigenous, Métis, Settler-Caucasian, and more recently, Newcomers and Immigrants (Rishworth et al., 2022). Furthermore, the selected high school had the most pupils in comparisons to the other three high schools.

Data collection methods were based on a series of qualitative research engagements including photovoice, semi-structured interviews, and focus groups. I analyzed the data collected through a framework of interpretative phenomenological analysis to further understand and make sense of the complex phenomenon. As critical consciousness theory upholds this study and IPA designs this study, I interpreted their critical reflections of equity and critical actions against their perceived equity and inequities through their lived experience.

The Research Context

The research was conducted in a *selected high school* within a resource-extraction town and isolated northern community. The historical narrative of this community resembles that of much of North America as in the era of European settlers, the doctrine of manifest destiny was invoked to justify the appropriation of land inhabited by Indigenous Peoples for millennia (Corbett, 2021), forcibly displacing these communities to the rural periphery as part of the westward expansion. Westward expansion had devastating effects on Indigenous Peoples as forced relocations, loss of land and cultural disruption (John & Ford, 2017). The issue lies in the capitalist agenda and settler colonialism, which, as noted by John and Ford (2017), led to the displacement of Indigenous populations from their ancestral lands, all to pave the way for settler communities and resource exploitation. The persistent challenge of resource exploitation remains a concern in the northern rural community under investigation, where the development of a new mine within this territory is yielding diverse negative effects on both the local community and the Indigenous People inhabiting this region.

Background

Canada's public education system has been recognized by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) for its high quality (Fullan & Rincon-Gallardo, 2016). However, this achievement did not come without challenges. In the 1990s, Canadian schools faced criticism for not adequately preparing students for the emerging knowledge-based economy (Basu, 2004). Nonetheless, since 2003, Ontario has made significant progress through the implementation of the Whole System Education Reform, which restored confidence in the primary and secondary education systems (Volante,

2007) and led to notable improvements in achievement scores in literacy, science, and mathematics (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2017a).

Despite these advancements, accessing high-quality education remains a significant challenge for northern rural schools in Ontario. Persistent disparities in educational opportunities continue to exist, and the opportunity gaps between urban and northern rural schools are often misunderstood (Corbett, 2014; Hall Mark, 2013; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2017a). Addressing these issues and bridging the gaps between urban and rural education systems remains an ongoing concern.

Numerous studies have investigated the issue of rural educational inequalities and the resulting achievement gaps (Rao & Hossain, 2011; Rowley et al., 2020; Sullivan et al., 2018). However, the literature has limited exploration of youth perspectives on educational equity. Most existing studies on educational equity primarily focus on the perspectives of teachers, community stakeholders, and parents. These studies highlight the disproportionate differences in various aspects such as test scores, dropout rates, Not in Employment, Education, or Training (NEET) rates, quality of physical schools, and educational opportunities and experiences (Cartwright & Allen, 2002; Hall Mark, 2013; Statistics Canada, 2018; Sullivan et al., 2018; Zarifa et al., 2019).The findings from previous research have successfully drawn the attention of political leaders and led to policy and funding changes aimed at addressing the significant disparities between urban and rural settings (Fullan & Rincon-Gallardo, 2016; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2017a/2017b). These changes have focused on closing achievement gaps by improving the overall quality of rural schools (Fullan & Rincon-Gallardo, 2016; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2017a), enhancing the preparation of educators for rural practice (Brook et al.,

2015), increasing funding for rural schools (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014/2017a/2017b), and improving access to technology to enhance virtual capacity (Barter, 2013; Government of Canada, 2019).

In fact, the Ontario Ministry of Education in 2017 aimed at improving rural education by releasing the *Ontario Rural Education Strategy.* This strategy provided the school boards with more decision-making power and authority. However, northern rural schools and communities argue that these initiatives are still lacking (Mahling et al., 2020). Many rural sociologists attribute the lack of effective initiatives on the covert *urban-normative* bias present in their efforts to create equity (Boyd & McShane, 2021; Nazariadli, 2018; Nazariadli et al., 2019). Urban-normative bias perpetuates the belief that urban settings are the norm and superior, while rural settings are deemed "other" and inferior (Nazariadli, 2018). This bias inadequately represents rural geographies and reinforces the elevated status of urban dwellers (Nazariadli et al., 2019). As a result, urban-normativity can marginalize rural populations, influencing the provision of essential services like healthcare, tourism, and education within rural communities (Fulkerson & Thomas, 2013; Nazariadli, 2018; Nazariadli et al., 2019; Thier & Beach, 2019).

Many of these efforts approach equity without challenging the system from which it operates. However, my approach to addressing educational equity in northern rural schools' centers on equity literacy as proposed by Gorski (2016). Educational equity acknowledges the disparities in opportunities, resources, and outcomes among each of their students. In order to foster equity, schools must conscientiously and fairly address the biases, discriminations, and inequities as they arise for students from these disparities.

It is essential for equitable schools to not only address individual biases, but also examine the broader societal changes necessary to combat bias, discrimination, and inequity. Ultimately, these schools strive to create and maintain inclusive communities free from bias and discrimination, recognizing that such efforts are the shared responsibility of all members of society. Equity in schools means recognizing, acting against, redressing, and abstaining from any subtle forms of bias, discrimination, and inequity as it pertains to the social, political, and structural conditions that marginalizes people (Gorski & Swalwell, 2015).

The equity literacy framework aims to provide educators with four key abilities rooted in equity: 1) The ability to identify even the subtlest forms of inequity, including subtle instances where students' home languages may be devalued within the school environment; 2) The ability to promptly address inequity in the short term, such as skillfully confronting colleagues or students who devalue students' home languages; 3) The ability to rectify long-term inequity by effectively and equitably addressing the underlying cultural dynamics within the institution that contribute to the acceptance of devaluing students' home languages; and 4) The ability to sustain efforts towards equity, even in the face of resistance, ensuring that progress continues to be made (Gorski, 2013). By engaging in these four actions, equity efforts become more effective at highlighting inequity.

In other words, educational equity in schools from the perspective of equity literacy centers the knowledge and skills explicitly and consistently on equity rather than culture, diversity or inclusivity (while acknowledging the importance of culture as one of many equity concerns). When centering equity, we are establishing a framework and a

movement that prioritizes issues like racism and heterosexism in discussions. This approach makes it more challenging for the institutions we engage with to divert from these crucial conversations and revert solely to discussions on cultural diversity.

By adopting flawed frameworks that do not center on equity (Gorski, 2016; Thier & Beach, 2019), racism, poverty and other marginalization recur, and urban-normativity biases overlooks crucial contextual factors such as geographic locale, remoteness, and isolation (Greenough & Nelson, 2015). These factors significantly impact the challenges faced by rural communities and necessitate tailored solutions. Thus, it is important to address the limitations of urban-normative bias and recognize the unique circumstances and requirements of rural areas in order to promote equitable access to services and opportunities.

The argument regarding the power dynamics between urban centers and rural communities is not a recent phenomenon. Thomas Adams, a prominent figure in Canadian rural and urban planning, emphasized this issue in his 1917 report on Rural Planning and Development, which identified three fundamental components still relevant today for achieving equity (Adams, 1917, p. 35). These components include the development of rural areas to ensure equitable access to services and goods, the provision of educational opportunities and social interaction to foster global competitiveness and connectivity, and the establishment of robust governance structures to promote local sovereignty. The current study intersects with Adams' century-old work because achieving equity in northern, rural schools necessitates a multi-sectoral approach, requiring collaboration among students, teachers, communities, and educational boards.

Colonizers developed northern, rural communities, including reservations, to control, segregate, displace, and oppress Indigenous people (Bleau, 2022). The term "rural" is a colonially defined description of a place of lesser value, one where they would send off Indigenous people to live away from civilization (Collier, 2006). As such, northern, rural communities and its people may face oppression in a number of ways, including a lack of access to basic services, economic marginalization, environmental degradation, discrimination, colonization, and political marginalization (Bishop, 2020). Some individuals, especially Indigenous People in northern, rural communities experience multiple levels of oppression, while some individuals may be part of many dominant groups, and therefore, not experience oppression at all (Bleau, 2022). Rurality is a form of oppression. Furthermore, the extent to, and the ways in which northern rural communities experience oppression differs from one another (Young, 2014).

Oppression is multifaceted and complex. Young's (2014) describes oppression by suggesting that "all oppressed people suffer some inhibition of their ability to develop and exercise their capacities and express their needs, thoughts, and feelings. In that abstract sense, all oppressed people face a common condition" (p. 4). As we know from the existing literature, the health disadvantage of rural individuals puts them at higher rates of chronic illnesses, poor health outcomes, and food insecurity (Kestler-D'Amours & O'Toole, 2019). The healthcare in northern, rural areas varies from community to community but it typically is not comprehensive because of a lack of facilities, infrastructure, and trained medical professionals (Pugh & Cheers, 2010). The common condition that oppresses northern, rural individuals is health disadvantage. This can lead

to the absence of preventative care, delayed treatment, and poorer health outcomes (Nguyen et al., 2020).

Young (2014) points out that there are five faces of oppression: exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence. The marginalization manifests in ways where northern, rural communities struggle to meet the social determinants of health of their residents and they have difficulty accessing basic services to help treat and manage these problems. In addition, northern, rural communities have limited access to quality education, including early childhood education, K-12 schools, and higher education institutions (Looker & Bollman, 2020). The manifestations of oppression, such as a lack of quality education, can lead to fewer opportunities for personal and professional growth, thereby inhibiting economic mobility (Bishop, 2020). Research has shown that a moderate socioeconomic status can mitigate the effects of oppression (Manstead, 2018). Therefore, when individuals are unable to overcome poverty because of a lack of educational opportunities, the cycle of poverty continues from generation to generation. Roosevelt (2008) points out the purpose of education is to produce good citizens, and good citizens learn to live their own lives to the maximum of one's abilities and opportunities. The lack of opportunities and quality education inhibits individuals' ability to overcome challenges and improve their lives (Kestler-D'Amours & O'Toole, 2019; Fan et al., 2017).

Economic marginalization sustains and maintains poverty in northern rural communities through the lack of job opportunities, low wages, and limited access to capital, thereby contributing to the cycles and generations of poverty within the communities (Mohatt & Mohatt, 2020). Young (2014) points out that marginalization is

the most dangerous form of oppression because “a whole category of people is expelled from useful participation in social life and thus potentially subjected to severe material deprivation and even extermination” (p. 18). A lack of industries and dependence on single industries causes both limited job opportunities and economic vulnerability for people, which contributes to high unemployment rates, and a lack of economic mobility (Mohatt & Mohatt, 2020). Even if job opportunities are available, rural communities may face low wages due to a lack of competition and bargaining power. Furthermore, banks and investors are limited in these communities. This can make it difficult for individuals and businesses to start and expand their operations.

Northern, rural communities may face political marginalization due to a lack of representation in government and decision-making processes (Mohatt & Mohatt, 2020). Young (2014) describes this as powerlessness, where northern rural individuals and communities may experience a sense of powerlessness in decision-making processes that affect their lives. This can lead to a lack of voice and influence in shaping policies that can affect land use planning, education, health care, and resource management (Bishop, 2015; Zapf, 2010). In educational research, evidence of political marginalization is present through the lack of research conducted in rural settings (Thier & Beach, 2019). In a literature review of educational research, Thier and Beach (2019) found “an extreme inattention to rural and remote locales, with 91.25% of all 606 studies neglecting rural and remote contexts'” (p. 8). This makes it difficult for northern rural communities to improve their quality of life as they are not thoroughly represented in the educational literature, thereby urban and suburban become the standard milieu for all research (Thier & Beach, 2019). Furthermore, the missing rural voice in government may result in

neglect of unique needs and challenges, such as harsh weather conditions, limited access to health care, and a lack of transportation infrastructure. The issue is that the population in these communities are usually low, but their unique needs and challenges are high. As such, without proper channels in place, the government is unlikely to improve the lives of individuals in northern rural communities without being made sufficiently aware of it. This repeats the cycle of marginalization and exacerbates existing problems.

Finally, the effects of colonization continue to plague northern, rural communities and this can lead to social exclusion and a lack of resources and opportunities within the community (Greenwood et al., 2017; Zapf, 2010). Indigenous Peoples have inhabited Turtle Island since time immemorial (Tuck & Yang, 2012). When European settlers asserted their claim to this land through the doctrine of manifest destiny, it resulted in profound and enduring devastation on Indigenous People and their ways of knowing (RedCorn et al., 2022). Cultural imperialism suggests that dominant cultural values and practices are superior, but the imposition of the dominant culture does not reflect Indigenous people's cultural identities or tradition (Young 2014). Settlers viewed Indigenous people as unworthy as "they occupy so much more space than they are entitled to either by numbers or worth" (Pratt, 1973, p. 265). The genocide of settler colonialism resulted in the extinction of over 90% of some populations (Greenwood et al., 2017). The effects of settler-colonialist ideologies still remain and contribute to attitudes regarding a superior and inferior race, as well as the interconnection of trauma, loss of community, and a lack of political power (Tuck & Yang, 2012).

Additionally, the impacts of oppression on rural communities have resulted in a multitude of disadvantages for northern rural communities. In light of these challenges,

educational researchers provide recommendations based on their findings to mitigate the effects of disadvantage on education. rural educational researchers argue that more culturally responsive pedagogies (Harrison & Skrebneva, 2020), pedagogies of belonging (Campbell, 2021; Corbett, 2020; Gourlay et al., 2021) and rural cultural wealth perspectives are needed to interrupt the social contagion of educational inequities (Crumb et al., 2023).

Culturally responsive pedagogies, pedagogies of belonging and cultural wealth perspectives are suggestions in the literature that could help create equity. Community cultural wealth is a concept that challenges traditional definitions of "wealth" by recognizing and valuing the diverse forms of knowledge, skills, and assets that exist within marginalized communities (Yosso, 2005). Coined by educational scholar Tara Yosso, community cultural wealth acknowledges that communities of color and other marginalized groups possess valuable cultural, social, and intellectual capital that often goes unrecognized or devalued in mainstream society (Yosso, 2005). According to Yosso and Burciaga (2016), the concept of community cultural wealth highlights six interrelated forms of capital that contribute to the resilience and success of marginalized communities, which include aspirational capital, linguistic capital, familial capital, navigational capital, social capital, and resistance capital. Community cultural wealth acknowledges that these forms of capital, which exist within marginalized communities, are valuable assets that can be harnessed and leveraged for educational success, personal growth, and community empowerment. By valuing and affirming the strengths and assets present in marginalized communities, community cultural wealth challenges deficit-based

perspectives and promotes a more inclusive and equitable approach to education and society as a whole (Yosso & Burciaga, 2016).

Culturally responsive pedagogies have demonstrated better acquisition of academic knowledge because learning is situated within the lived experiences of students (Gay, 2010). Culturally responsive pedagogies are enormously influential as they modify the curriculum to lead from the cultural backgrounds and interests of the learners (Ladson-Billings, 2014). On the other hand, pedagogies of belonging emphasize the teacher-student relationship and include students in all aspects of the classroom and school community (Bokser, 2005; Harrison & Skrebneva, 2020). It places emphasis on classroom practices and a school climate that promotes youth development and connection (Comber, 2015; Comber & Woods, 2018). To maximize students' abilities and opportunities, Roosevelt (2008) states,

> The teacher's personality and character are of the greatest importance. I have known many erudite and scholarly men and women who were dismal failures as teachers. I have known some less learned teachers who had the gift of inspiring youth and sending them on to heights where perhaps they themselves were unable to follow. (p. 7)

To help improve rural education, various approaches can be taken. First, addressing the long-standing maladaptive reputation associated with rural communities is crucial. Historically, rural communities and their people have been burdened with a deficit mentality, which has inadvertently influenced perceptions of rural schools (Crumbs et al., 2023; Philo, 1992). Unfortunately, this mindset can also affect students, as they may internalize and adopt the same negative outlook (Atkinson et al., 2016). Consequently, a shift in attitude toward rural communities, their residents, and their schools becomes essential for fostering equitable education (Corbett, 2020). By adopting a cultural wealth

perspective, the focus shifts to the assets and possibilities within these communities, rather than solely highlighting their shortcomings (Crumbs et al., 2023). By implementing these suggestions from existing literature, it is possible to counteract the urban-normative bias and promote greater equity in education.

Statement of the Problem

In Canada, northern, rural communities have higher populations of Indigenous and Francophone communities (Strasser et al., 2013); they are more geographically dispersed than urban settings, have less access to health care, inconsistent internet and technology infrastructure, less food sovereignty; and an overall higher dependence on the government to provide the latter services (Desmarais & Wittman, 2014; Jong et al., 2019; Mian & Strasser, 2017; Strasser et al., 2016). Northern, rural schools have limited funding, multi-grade classes, old infrastructure, and recruitment and retainment issues to name a few (Aguliera & Nightengale-Lee, 2020; Corbett, 2016). In Ontario, the government has implemented educational strategies such as the *Education Equity Action Plan* and *Ontario Rural Education* to help create equity and promote high-quality education in northern, rural schools regardless of gender, socioeconomic status or racial/lingual identity in (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2017a, 2017b). In addition, the *Ontario Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy* provided school boards with the authority to create and implement their own educational equity policies (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009). However, geographic isolation and location are missing in equity policies and efforts (Kozleski, Thorius, & Smith, 2013; Rezai-Rashti et al., 2017; Reid, 2017), which further compounds the disadvantages experienced in schools in northern, rural contexts.

The challenge of addressing rural educational disadvantages is partially attributed to the reliance of Ontario's education policy structure and systems on urban assumptions (Reid, 2017). While some decision-making power is shared between governments and local school boards (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009/2017a/2017b), the majority of educational policies are centralized and primarily designed for urbanized conditions (Agbo, 2011). In an effort to address educational disparities in northern rural Ontario schools, the Ontario Ministry of Education (2017) introduced a plan titled *A Plan to Strengthen Rural and Northern Education.* This plan aimed to promote equity in areas such as mental health, travel distances to schools, and access to extracurricular opportunities. However, this initiative was abolished by the incoming provincial government shortly after its creation during an election year (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2017b). The discontinuation of initiatives based on political favour sends a clear message to rural communities that their concerns are considered peripheral compared to the power centralized in the south (Mayor & Suarez, 2019).

Mayor and Suarez (2019) argue that without a comprehensive term to conceptualize equitable education for all of Canada, meaningful change will not occur. The lack of consistent discourse and theoretical frameworks surrounding this issue hinders progress. Consequently, school boards and government authorities may continue to disregard the challenges associated with geographic location and isolation as significant equity targets deserving inclusion in educational policies.

The lack of consideration for geographic factors in existing frameworks can be attributed to the historical approach to addressing educational inequity. Scholars such as Anderson (1989), Fultz (1995), Tyack (2004), and Gorski (2016) have extensively

documented educational disparities in North America based on race, class, and gender. In recent years, the redefinition of equity in Ontario has been shaped by performative systems of accountability, where boys are portrayed as the new disadvantaged group and "recent immigrants" replace racialized minorities as the focus of equitable education efforts (Rezai-Rashti et al., 2017).

Initially, equity policy in education focused on addressing the needs of disadvantaged and marginalized groups by providing them with resources to promote a more equitable system (Ontario Ministry of Education, 1993). However, Rezai-Rashti et al. (2017) argue that the Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy introduced in 2009 shifted its emphasis towards closing achievement gaps rather than addressing equity issues related to "gender, race, and socioeconomic status" (p. 168). While Nicholls (2020) sees the Ontario strategy as a positive step forward, expanding definitions of equity and diversity to ensure students feel represented and respected in their curriculum and environment (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009, p. 4), Rezai-Rashti et al. (2021) discovered that the policies developed by eight school boards in southwestern Ontario during the 2019-2020 period simply copied word-for-word the descriptions from the Ontario Ministry of Education's equity policy. They failed to incorporate locally informed nuances, procedures, and evaluation methods into their own policies.

Nonetheless, one positive outcome of the *Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy* (2009) is that it required school boards to adopt equity policies within the framework of the strategy. In essence, individual educational boards were empowered to implement their own policies focusing on various "dimensions of diversity, including ancestry, culture, ethnicity, gender, gender identity, language, physical and intellectual ability,

race, religion, sex, sexual orientation, and socio-economic status" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009, p. 6). However, according to Rezai-Rashti et al. (2021), the analysis reveals that these equity policies are "non-performative and primarily serve as generic statements intended to protect institutions rather than effectively address educational inequities" (p. 22). While the efforts made by the Ontario government to improve equity in schools through the release of strategies and delegation of decision-making authority to school boards are promising for the future of Ontario education, without clear procedures, implementation strategies, and evaluative measures (Rezai-Rashti et al., 2021), equity policies alone are ineffective in achieving true equity.

A clear commitment to equity from Ontario school boards is demonstrated in school boards equity and inclusion policies (Rezai-Rashti et al., 2021), but the lack of performative action to adhere to their policy continues to be a problem, as Buffone (2022) suggests,

> The development of shared mindsets regarding a small number of ambitious goals (system coherence) and the implementation of administrative processes such as policies, procedures, practices and protocols (system alignment) that support the optimization of the multi-year strategic plan may, at times, prove difficult to achieve, especially as it relates to bias awareness and critical consciousness, as well as ameliorated fairness and impartiality throughout the organization. (p. ii)

The lack of equity policy implementation in Ontario school boards is one facet of the problem (Buffone, 2022; Rezai-Rashti et al., 2021); however, so is the lack of explicit consideration for geographic isolation and location (Meit, 2018; Nicholls, 2020).

Rural community leaders and advocates are aware of the contribution of geographic location and isolation to equity issues in northern rural educational systems. Local school boards have the power to mitigate the effects of urban-normativity through their decisions. However, the educational policy process, influenced by urban-

normativity, fails to incorporate the logistical challenges of rural areas (Nicholls, 2020), exacerbating existing inequities for students and impeding their access to success (Kozleski et al., 2013; Meit, 2018; Rezai-Rashti et al., 2017; Reid, 2017). Despite this, explicitly considering geographic location and isolation can serve as objective starting points for discussions on addressing equity and urban-normative bias (Yost, 2018).

The absence of geographic location and isolation as focal points within educational equity policies reinforces spatial marginality and urban-normativity, perpetuating inconsistent government action and support (Meit, 2018; O'Malley et al., 2018). Without a conscious awareness of internalized urban-normative biases and the recognition of geographic location and isolation as contributors to the urban-rural divide, it becomes challenging to achieve equity. However, youth development has been recognized in the literature as an important factor in understanding and creating equity in schools (Buffone, 2022).

Youth development is the dynamic process of nurturing and supporting young individuals in their growth, potential, and overall well-being (Burkhard et al., 2020). It encompasses multiple dimensions of a young person's life, including their physical, cognitive, emotional, social, and moral development (Burkhard et al., 2020). By acknowledging the unique needs, strengths, and capabilities of young people, youth development aims to equip them with the necessary resources, opportunities, and support to thrive and achieve their full potential. At its core, youth development focuses on cultivating positive outcomes and fostering the acquisition of skills, competencies, and attributes that enable young people to effectively navigate challenges and make meaningful contributions to society (Ardoin et al., 2022). It places emphasis on holistic

development, recognizing the interconnectedness of different aspects of a young person's life, including family, school, community, and culture, and how they collectively shape their well-being (Arnold & Gagnon, 2020). There are several key elements that contribute to youth development and schools hold a vital role in fostering its growth. As such, youth voices on educational equity provide key perspectives on all aspects of their schooling.

The scarcity of youth perspectives on equity and rural education in the existing literature (Corbett & Gereluk, 2020) underscores the timeliness of amplifying their voices to gain insights into their experiences. While there are undeniable gaps within northern rural schools, it is crucial to recognize their significant strengths as well. Existing literature suggests the adoption of place-based and culturally responsive pedagogies, as well as embracing the cultural wealth, including positive youth development, present in rural schools (Buffone, 2022; Cuban, 2010; Rezai-Rashti et al., 2017; Rezai-Rashti et al., 2021). Therefore, listening to youths' perspectives on equity in rural education becomes crucial and holds significant value.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study is to understand equitable rural education in a northern rural and remote public secondary school context, to identify both barriers to educational success within an isolated geographic milieu and novel ways of solving disparities by building on strengths gained from the youths' perspectives. My research questions provide a focus of inquiry on equity in education and aim to gain insight into issues experienced by students attending northern rural schools in order to add to existing knowledge that could create opportunities for change in educational policy.

Relatively little is known about how youth experience and perceive equitable education in northern rural contexts (Corbett & Gereluk, 2020; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2017a). Youth perspectives may provide practical and insider knowledge on the qualities and strengths that support them through the existing gaps. Youth voices ought to be reflected in the educational discourse to improve northern rural education. Schools and students have succeeded in challenging circumstances (Flessa et al., 2010). The research provides youth narratives for rural education, which may be necessary for creating equity in schools. To date, there is limited research on the exclusive perspective of equity from northern rural youth. As such, this research delves into the perspectives of young individuals regarding educational equity within the rural northern context, aiming to enhance existing successful practices and rectify prevailing disparities.

Research Questions

The following research questions have guided my doctoral research throughout the process:

- How do northern, rural youth ages 15 to 18 years old experience educational equity in a geographically isolated high school?
- What are the spatial, educational and socio-cultural obstacles encountered in northern, rural secondary education?
- How does schooling situated within a northern rural and remote context influence youth development?

Nature of the Study

The phenomenon that I investigated is the youths' perspectives on barriers to and strengths of an equitable rural education in a northern and isolated context. It is a difficult feat to implement measures for equity in every secondary school, but northern rural youth experience an additional layer of complexity because of their geographical disparity and isolation (Corbett & Gereluk, 2020). This means spatial marginality is directly consequential to their unique experiences as well as many challenges that youth face during that period of development. This research seeks to uncover such experiences by also acknowledging that these youth are navigating their educational experience to the best of their ability, and their strategies for success are meaningful.

Photovoice was the primary data collection method because previous literature supports using this research method with marginalized youth (Taylor & Tilley, 2018). Based on the concept of urban-normativity explained above, I challenge the assumption of northern rural schools as inferior, and blame spatial marginality as one of many problems contributing to issues related to accessibility and delivery of quality goods, care and services (Fulkerson & Thomas, 2013/2016; Thier & Beach, 2019). As such, photovoice is a highly effective method to amplify issues in marginalized contexts, and to encourage the development of social morality for these positive agents of change (Sutton-Brown, 2014). Participants took photos of meaningful images to express a need or strength in order to assist change (Sutton-Brown, 2014). Further, interviews and a focus group were additional methods to understand how participants' photographs represent equitable rural education (Creswell, 2014).

Operational Definition of Terms

Rural: In this context, rural refers to communities that are geographically distant from urbanized cities (Statistics Canada, 2017). Rural areas in Canada are a nuanced social construct that Statistics Canada (2017) describes as all territory lying outside of population centres. Rural communities are the population existing outside of population centers and have populations of less than 1,000, or more with a population density of less than 400 per square kilometre (Statistics Canada, 2017).

Northern: According to Statistics Canada (2017), northern refers to all of Canada's geography north of approximately 50° latitude.

Remote: In this context, remote refers to being geographically isolated and with limited access to a variety of goods and services (Alasia et al., 2017).

Achievement gap: An achievement gap is an umbrella term in education literature (Looker & Bollman, 2020) that refers to gaps between populations in 1) high school graduation rates, and; 2) standardized testing scores.

Equity in rural schools: According to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (2018), the definition of educational equity in rural schools is a fair and inclusive education regardless of gender, ethnic, socioeconomic status or geographic location. Fairness includes ensuring that personal and social circumstances are not obstacles to achieving educational potential, and being inclusive includes ensuring a basic minimum standard of education for all.

Assumptions

The assumptions guiding the present study are as follows:

a) Northern, rural youth are the sole and exclusive voice required to answer the research questions.

b) Youth are agents of change who can share their knowledge on equitable practices in rural schools and act against inequities.
c) Educational equity in northern, rural schools has the potential to enhance positive youth development
d) The selected community and selected school for this research experiences struggles cited in the literature including access to quality education, funding and proper financing, structural problems, poverty, racism, drug addiction, mental health problems, inadequate housing, and a digital divide (Peterson, McIntyre, & Heppner, 2018; Perry 2009; Philo, 1992) at disproportionate levels compared to urban counterparts

Scope and Delimitations

This study's scope was the lived experiences of student-youth, aged 15-18 years old, who grew up in a northern rural context. The research questions were designed to focus on the individual youth's experiences and opinions of the topic. As such, there was no expectation to speak on behalf of others such as the school, northern youth, Indigenous youth, or Francophone youth. The delimitations included permissions from the principal, parent and student (participant). These individuals were made aware of the research and were briefed on the topic. The interviews occurred virtually because of the restrictions on research during the pandemic, and the participants were aware of their option to withdraw at any time during the course of the research. The topic at hand did not evoke psychological or emotional stress.

Safeguards were put in place to minimize the risk of technology. The most substantial safeguard was the use of Microsoft Teams as the main technological platform

as it was already an approved platform by the school. Another safeguard was the time and place of the data collection. Interviews and focus groups took place while participants were at school, for example, during a break from class or during a spare period. This ensured that adults were nearby in the event that concerns arose. Finally, this study was not intended to provide general statements about rural youth or about those who have similarities to rural youth.

Summary

This chapter encapsulated the background of, and the problem that, this study aims to explore. The purpose of this study is to understand northern rural youth perspectives on educational equity in rural education through exploring their lived experiences using photovoice, interview and focus groups. The three overarching viewpoints were presented: one, despite the freedom in contextualizing equity policies in Ontario, geographic isolation and location is not an explicit target; two, Ontario equity policies exist without procedures or follow through to create equity, and three, youth narratives on educational equity are scant. The following chapter provides a review of the existing literature on equitable rural education and northern rural youth, and a discussion on the purpose of using critical consciousness as a theory to inform this research.

Chapter Two: Review of the Literature

In my introduction, I brought contextual understandings of equity and inequity in rural education. In this chapter, I synthesize literature on the following topics: education in Canada, northern rural education in Ontario, quality in northern rural schools, and equity in Ontario schools. Furthermore, I provide relevant literature for the present study's application of critical consciousness theory as a conceptual framework. The primary scope of this literature review is research from northern and rural Ontario, Canada. I extended the geographic scope to the United States (US) and Australia in cases where there is no existing literature specific to northern and rural Ontario. I chose to include research from these two countries, as they resemble the geographic landscape and population groups that we have in Canada. I included other research locations when they met the criteria for research conducted with "northern and rural secondary schools."

Education in Canada

As per the Constitution of Canada, each province has the responsibility of delivering free elementary and secondary education to its citizens (The British North America Act, 1867). The exception of this law is Indigenous peoples, French and English second language education, and Canadian armed forces children, as they are considered under the jurisdiction and authority of the federal government. An important caveat is that many Indigenous students in Ontario receive their education in provincially funded schools (Crooks et al., 2022). Another important caveat is that even though funding comes from the federal government for Indigenous students, the curriculum and policies are developed at the provincial level. The latter and the former both contribute to the systemic issues that play out in our educational system, such as improper funding, lack of

First Nation educational sovereignty, and a disproportionate number of Indigenous students not completing secondary education (Crooks et al., 2022).

In Ontario, the provincial government oversees the educational sector through policies on funding, curriculum, regulations and delivery (Fullan & Fincon-Gallardo, 2018). The province of Ontario occupies 219,650 square miles of land, with over 14 million citizens (Statistics Canada, 2019). There are 72 publicly funded school boards, with 4 of those being considered geographically isolated (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2020). Each of those boards is classified as either English public, English Catholic, French public, or French Catholic. Over 95% of school age children attend publicly funded schools, with the remainder attending either private or home schools (Fullan & Rincon-Gallardo, 2018). Consistent with the centralization of education (Agbo, 2011), the curriculum for each class in each grade is standardized for all students attending publicly funded secondary schools with few exceptions. However, the curriculum does not ensure the availability of all subjects offered at each school, especially in smaller schools, such as northern rural ones, where fewer human and financial resources exist (Fullan & Rincon-Gallardo, 2018). As cited by Haynes (2022), "in a time of equity-focused education in Canada, urban-centred operational policies enacted by provincial ministries of education and school districts may be producing inequities in some rural areas of the nation" (p. 60). In the next section, I refer to the existing literature on northern and rural contexts in schools.

Northern, Rural Contexts in Schools

Northern, rural and remote communities in Canada are heterogeneous from urban communities. They can be identified by the following characteristics: unique climate,

topography, population density, distance to urban centres, local economy, and access to other infrastructure services such as roads and reliable electricity (Council of Canada Academies, 2021). The Canadian North is a contested geography (Corbett & Helmer, 2017), and studies in the US illustrates how isolated rural communities have always been viewed as an agricultural and industrial landmass supporting in earnest the national and urban economy (Little, 2017). Indigenous communities and settlers of European descent make up the majority of the population in northern rural areas (Philo, 1992). People in geographically isolated and rural areas have always been struggling for inclusion and equity (Green & Letts, 2007) in the delivery of technology, healthcare, education, social services, and arts and recreation (Council for Canadian Academies, 2021; Little, 2017). The federal and provincial governments have made efforts to try to address the shortage of most services in those communities; however, a consistent lack of equitable services remains (Azano, 2014). As it applies to education, the Ontario Ministry of Education does not emphasize on contextual nuances as much as it called for (Ferenczy, 2021), thereby contributing to the limited changes of the delivery of education in the Canadian North.

Defining Rural and Northern Ontario Context

It is crucial to understand the intersection of structural barriers and space to contextualize this research. Ontario has a growing population, representing 38.6% of the population of Canada overall (Ontario Ministry of Finance, 2019). Northern Ontario, however, has a smaller population but dispersed over 88% of the Ontarian land mass (Northern Policy Institute, 2017). For this research, I focus on the area that is distant and intermediate North according to the Northern Policy Institute (2017). Community and

land in the distance north are very sparsely settled and isolated from one another (Northern Policy Institute, 2017). The intermediate north constitutes land and communities situated along Lake Superior, and they are better connected to large urban centers and each other (Northern Policy Institute, 2017). Rural as a space and place, is contested in the literature. According to Statistics Canada, the definition of rural is any land situated outside of populated centers (Statistics Canada, 2017). This definition is too wide-ranging to provide the parameters required for the controversial topic of equity. The Ontario Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care provided a distinct definition to describe rural communities, as they stated, "a rural community has a population of less than 30,000 and greater than 30 minutes away in travel time from a community with a population of more than 30,000" (Ontario Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care, 2011, p. 8). Put otherwise, the parameters of rurality are relational to urban space (Burnett et al., 2021).

Northern Rural Education in Ontario

While there is an established body of literature on rural education (Reading et al., 2019), rural healthcare (Wilson et al., 2020), and rural sociology (Corbett, 2007), there are few published articles examining northern dimension of rural education in Canada (Corbett, 2006; Looker & Bollman, 2020; Peterson & Portier, 2017). The existing literature that focuses on rural education is primarily based out of the US. Of the existing literature, the main topics of study are educational disparities, quality of education, brick and mortar differences, equity and inequality issues, and models to solve the problems between rural and urban contexts (Alasia et al., 2017; Azano & Stewart, 2016; Barter, 2013; Bouchamma & Lapointe, 2008; Looker & Bollman, 2020). Within these studies,

the main informants are teachers, principals and parents. In the following paragraphs, I discuss the northern rural education literature by beginning with the reasons why rurality has been modestly researched.

Prior to the 1990s, research conducted in rural contexts drew little interest amongst academics (Little, 2017). There are several reasons for this: lack of research funding for rural settings, very few randomized control trials, and limited literature base to build upon (Arnold et al., 2005, p. 1). However, rural settings are a distinct context that is important to study because of the uniqueness and untapped resilience embedded within the people (Azano & Biddle, 2019; Little, 2017). Inspired by the academic nudge of Chris Philot in 1992, rural sociologists and educational researchers have conducted significant research concerning rural women (Sachs, 2018), rural children (Halliday, 1997), rural racialized people (Cloke, 2013), rural Indigenous communities (Schill & Caxaj, 2019), and rural schools (Scott & Louie, 2020). This has resulted in a modest understanding of the rural contexts that mark unique considerations compared to urban contexts.

In Ontario, rural schools account for 19% of enrolment (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2017a). Rural communities pose unique contextual circumstances for youth, such as isolation, poverty, and limited resources compared to their urban counterparts (Irvin et al., 2011; Tomyn, Cummins, & Norrish, 2015). The existing literature acknowledges that youth who live in rural communities experience higher rates of poverty (Irvin et al., 2011), racism (Giroux, 2003; Hill et al., 2020), childhood trauma (Martinek & Hellison, 1998), and homophobia (Woodell, 2018) and are more susceptible to inequities. Research in the past decade found rural youth who experience abuse are at a

higher risk for addiction, criminality, learning issues, truancy, school dropout, dismal mental health, and low employment rates (Dupéré et al., 2019; Shin & Csiki, 2021) and consequences are potentially life-long (Dupéré et al., 2019). School closures, amalgamations resulting from declining school enrollment, and student transportation to schools, have required students to travel further away from their place of residence (Ferenczy, 2021). More recently, the changes to Ontario education from the pandemic of COVID 19 have caused much restructuring of educational service provision, programs, student support services, and the emergence of online and virtual platforms (Ferenczy, 2021).

The gamut of disadvantages and risks for northern rural students is outstanding. Scholars have identified education as a determining factor in lifelong outcomes (see Fan et al., 2017; McGill, 2016; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014). Education disparities between rural and urban schools are an ongoing concern in Canada (Agbo, 2011). Education has always played a role in mitigating those risks (Ferenczy, 2021). Rural political activists (see Matthews & Christopher, 2016) deem access to high-quality education necessary to curb out-migration, raise the quality of life, enhance psychosocial function, and reduce the effects of poverty (Croft & Moore, 2019). However, there are ongoing issues in accessing high-quality education in rural and remote communities in Canada (Croft & Moore, 2019; OECD, 2021; Peterson et al., 2018; Reid, 2017). It is difficult to provide a quality education when there are funding cuts, staff turnover, and other pressing challenges like mental health and addiction (Dupéré et al., 2019). In Ontario, the discrepancies in access to high-quality education are conceptualized as the main contributors to achievement gaps between urban and rural settings (Adamson et al.,

2016; Fullan & Rincon-Gallardo, 2018; Looker & Bollman, 2020; Statistics Canada, 2017). A compounding factor is that most of the rural youth in northern rural Ontario are either Indigenous or Francophone (Strasser et al., 2013); two groups that experience marginalization in Ontario.

The disparities between urban and northern rural schools are complex and vary from community to community. The following structural issues are consistent across Canada: 1) significant difference in available technology (Wang, 2013); 2) achievement gaps (Heppner, 2017); 3) limited transportation, mental health support and extracurricular opportunities (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2017b); 4) the top-up per-student funding model for rural schools is based on urban contexts and does not meet needs of rural schools (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2017b); 5) recruitment and retention of qualified educators (Valentine, 2017); 6) limited staff teaching multi-grade classes and beyond their competence (Azano & Stewart, 2016); and 7) expectation of teachers to support students beyond their role (Darling-Hammond & Podolsky, 2019). The neoliberal myth of neutrality in education discourse—that all students have the same opportunity to succeed in schools—manifests in the view that individual rural students and schools are to blame for their lower achievement levels (Shah, 2018). The academic disparity between urban and rural jurisdictions is alarming, and research indicates that it is a multi-stakeholder problem and not an individual one (see Heppner, 2017). Northern, rural youth are at a disadvantage because of their location.

The impetus from rural educators to make education more equitable and close the achievement gaps are strong (Ferenczy, 2021). In Ontario, educational strategies such as the Education Equity Action Plan (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2017a) and Ontario

Rural Education (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2017b) have aimed to eliminate barriers regardless of location, socioeconomic status, or racialized/lingual identities. In several developed countries, socioeconomic status is the most reliable predictor of academic performance *(*Alston & Kent, 2009*;* Sullivan et al., 2018; Valentine, 2017*)*. The quality of education, which in this case is the instruction and curriculum, is another contributor to the problem (Corbett, 2016). Curriculum relevance (i.e., test-focused pedagogies or place-based education) is also a contributor (Corbett, 2016). Further, curriculum created in and for large schools is a longstanding issue for rural contexts (Rintoul & Bishop, 2019). The academic expectations are the same for urban and rural schools, despite significantly fewer human and financial resources (Dupéré et al., 2019). Yet, educational leaders and government continue to tackle the achievement gaps (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2017a) without looking at the economic, political, structural disparities, and differences of rural communities as a whole (Dupéré et al., 2019).

Governments, institutions, and training have made constructive changes to bridge the gap between rural and urban education and student success, including preparing educators for rural practice (Brook et al., 2015), increasing funding for rural schools (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2017), and improving technology for better access (Barter, 2013). Both the Student Success Strategy and Ontario Leadership Strategy in 2005-2009 aimed at increasing equity in Ontario secondary schools by identifying and supporting struggling students and by forming district leadership capacity (Campbell, 2021). Further, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission report (2015) has 94 calls to action for Canada, including 18 calls for the education sector to implement, which will undoubtedly help equitable rural education. However, the impact of these efforts take

time, and discrepancies in outcomes and achievement between contexts remain for now (Hernández-Torrano, 2018).

While closing the achievement gaps in rural and urban schools is the priority for governments (Azano & Biddle, 2019; Ontario Government of Education, 2017a), avoiding substantial cuts to funding, consolidation, and school closures is the priority for local school boards' administrators (Corbett, 2016). The focus at the school level is to ensure student enrolment is high enough to stay open and hiring and retaining sufficient teachers and staff; issues about educational quality unfortunately become a lower priority (Fullan & Rincon-Gallardo, 2016). Although the Ontario government has made significant changes to the governance of education, the hard power remains in their hands resulting in a high degree of centralization of education (Agbo, 2011; Faubert & Paulson, 2020). Regardless of the administrative priorities for government and leadership, teachers acknowledge that their priority is for their students to develop a sense of self and acquire knowledge (Azano & Biddle, 2019; Corbett, 2020; Echazarra & Radinger, 2019).

Quality Education in Ontario

Education leaders view Ontario's education system as an exemplar of high-quality education (Fullan & Rincon-Gallardo, 2018). Identified internationally as the most improved education system, Ontario's performance and student achievement has increased from 54% (2003) to 72% (2014) since the implementation of the 2003 Whole System Reform Strategy WSRS (Fullan & Rincon-Gallardo, 2018). Educational achievements such as literacy and numeracy have improved since 2003 because of the action-oriented implementation strategies of the WSRS (Boyd & McShane, 2021; Fullan & Rincon-Gallardo, 2018). The Liberal government, Dalton McGuinty, spearheaded

this reform in an effort to re-establish the broken trust between the Ministry of Education and the teacher's union (Boyd & McShane, 2021). The reform leaders granted an increased level of autonomy and decision-making power to local Ontario school boards and became more supportive instead of punitive (Boyd & McShane, 2021; Levin, 2008). According to Fullan and Rincon-Gallardo (2018), the creation of the Whole System Reform Strategy followed four concepts: partnership, capacity building, focus on results, and a relentless commitment to enhanced learning. It consisted of eight factors: 1) develop a small number of ambitious goals; 2) collaborative leadership with a focus on improving teaching and learning; 3) high standards and expectations on literacy and numeracy via standardized curriculum; 4) a focus on capacity building for instruction; 5) mobilizing data and using effective instructional strategies; 6) interventions of a non-punitive manner; 7) supportive initiatives to increase core capacity for students; and 8) teachers to be transparent, persistent and challenging in their instruction. According to Fullan (2011), the WSRS did not produce the depth of improvements that they had hoped. However, the initial goals on the WSRS were very grandiose in nature, and this policy sparked a positive movement in providing inclusive education in Ontario (Fullan, 2011; Fullan & Rincon-Gallardo, 2018; Zeichner et al., 2017).

The preoccupation of governments is to close achievement gaps for rural schools and students. Azano and Biddle (2019) argue that a rural praxis consisting of educational leadership, classroom teaching, educator preparation and problem formation for rural education is required for high-quality education to be achieved and achievement gaps to be rectified. However, it is argued by rural education advocates that high-quality education in rural schools can be overshadowed by ensuring sufficient pupil numbers and

staff, addressing staff burnout and complex student learning needs, and that initiatives to make change come from all parties from each district (provincial government, school boards, and school leadership; Corbett, 2016). Further to this point, a study by Fullan and Rincon-Gallardo (2016) discussed the implication of rural schools prioritizing student enrolment, staffing, and finding it difficult to focus on high quality education when the population of rural and remote communities continues to decline. More recently, a report from the OECD (2021) discussed how policymakers are constantly weighing the financial viability of providing high quality education as close to home as possible. Further, the OECD (2021) report highlighted ". . . schools with small and/or decreasing student enrolment ready for the future lies at the heart of the policy debate about education provision in rural and remote areas" (p. 33). It is evident that rural schools are making sincere efforts to deliver education to students, considering the associated costs of ensuring high-quality education for all (Scott & Louie, 2020). However, incorporating a rural praxis (Azano & Biddle, 2019) would require a significant and dedicated commitment.

Quality is at the core of education in Ontario schools (OECD, 2021). Currently, quality and equity are determined by standardized tests and curriculum (i.e. test-focused pedagogies), or by placed-based education (i.e. progressive experiential learning) (Corbett, 2016). Educational policymakers must confront the longstanding problem of creating curriculum for schooling and consider the role that material disadvantage plays on student participation and achievement in schooling (Martino & Rezai-Rashti, 2017). Curriculum and standardized testing serve a purpose in understanding quality and equity (Rintoul & Bishop, 2019), but it cannot overshadow the commitment to addressing the

underlying causes of educational failure or the uneven educational outcomes (Martino & Rezai-Rashti, 2017). Furthermore, learning targets are the same for urban and rural schools despite significantly lesser resources and different ways of knowing (Dupéré et al., 2019). Yet, educational leaders and government continue to tackle the achievement gaps (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2017a) without looking at the economic, political, and structural inequities of rural schools (Dupéré et al., 2019).

There are multiple concepts in the literature that encapsulate a quality secondary education, and I start with training and education for teachers in rural Ontario. Afterwards, I focus on school culture, curriculum, and instruction (Fullan, 2011; Zeichner et al., 2017).

Rural Teacher preparation

The location of a school influences the distribution of staff with different levels of experience and qualifications (Echazarra & Radinger, 2019). It can be more challenging for northern rural school boards to hire quality teachers and leadership (Azano et al., 2020). In order to recruit teachers from non-rural contexts, it is crucial to provide them with adequate preparation for working in northern rural contexts. This not only reduces staff turnover and burnout but also enhances teaching quality (Azano et al., 2020). Post-secondary institutions are prioritizing the preparation of teacher candidates for northern, rural practice by providing context specific courses such as special topics in rural and remote practice (Button et al., 2022). Universities in Ontario employ a combination of coursework, experiential learning, mentorship programs, and community collaborations to prepare their students for northern rural practice. These initiatives aim to equip students with the knowledge, skills, and cultural competence needed to provide quality

services in rural communities. In addition to the preparation provided by educational institutions, rural teachers often face a lack of in-service training, professional development, and ongoing support throughout their teaching careers in northern rural communities (Du Plessis & Mestry, 2019). However, Echazarra and Radinger (2019) found in their study that despite less formal support, the tight knit community of staff was highly effective for teacher morale.

The intentional efforts to prepare teachers for rural classrooms is not well documented in the literature. Of the existing studies, I divide the literature in two categories: one, teacher education programs to prepare their learners for rural practice (Azano & Stewart, 2016; Sheehan & Fullan, 2013; Zarifa et al., 2019), and two, rural people preparing their practice via formalized teacher education programs (Brown, 2014; Eaton et al., 2017).

Universities offer courses that specifically focus on the unique challenges and needs of rural communities in Northern Ontario (Zarifa et al., 2019). These courses cover topics such as rural health care, community engagement, and cultural competency. Students are offered placements in rural settings to gain hands-on experience and exposure to the realities of rural practice (Zarifa et al., 2019). Finally, cultural competency training is another method to prepare rural students for northern practice. Some universities provide cultural competency training to students. This training is usually geared to helping students develop the necessary skills to effectively communicate and engage with individuals from different backgrounds in rural settings (Brown, 2014).

Studies like Azano and Stewart (2016) found that pre-service teachers who had limited rural experience need more tangible rural preparation beyond relationship building with their students and making the curriculum relevant; rather, they need to "make concerted efforts to dig deeply into the concepts of culture and place to explore how individual differences influence teaching and learning" (p. 119). A pedagogy that is culturally responsive, dialogic, and emphasizes the significance of place and meaningful teaching experiences can provide better support for teacher candidates who choose to teach in rural contexts (Azano & Stewart, 2016). Qualified rural teacher recruitment is a big challenge (Eaton et al., 2015; Eaton et al., 2017; Zarifa et al., 2019). Therefore, "growing our own teachers" is a concept that emerged to fill the gap on rural teacher shortages (Barbour, 2014, pg. 11). However, the increasing trend of rural teacher shortages is exacerbated by the need for prospective rural teachers to leave their communities to pursue teacher education. Consequently, this results in teachers emigrating from their small communities to teach elsewhere, with fewer of them returning to teach in their home communities (Eaton et al., 2015; Eaton et al., 2017). In response to this, post-secondary education programs have adapted their teaching degrees to include online, distance-learning options, for example, Laurentian University (Eaton et al., 2015).

Quality online teacher education programs have the potential to transform the qualified rural teacher shortages (Eaton et al., 2017). As such, Eaton et al. (2017) studied the optimal design for a responsive online rural teacher education program and piloted an online, distance Bachelor of Education degree for a rural teacher education program in Canada. The findings of this study indicated three important themes: (1) Collaborative

course design enhanced the student experience (2) Student support programs were developed to address emerging needs, and (3) Using synchronous learning technologies to increase student engagement. The recommendations were for instructors to enhance their collaboration with their students on the course design and add responsive support for their students that extended beyond the classroom. In summary, more research needs to be conducted to understand the effectiveness of these new adapted teaching degrees for rural teachers.

School Culture

Student achievement is an indicator of quality education (Ozgenel, 2020), but the influence of the school environment cannot be ignored (Spicer, 2016). According to the literature, the contributing factors to a positive school culture are leadership, teacher collaboration, professional development, agreement in purpose, collegial support, and learning partnerships (Blitz et al., 2020; Drago-Severson, 2012; Reyes et al., 2012; Spicer, 2016). There is widespread belief in the literature that the quality of principals and vice principals make a significant difference to the school environment and student outcomes (Blitz et al., 2020; Spicer, 2016; Tatlah et al., 2014). Teacher collaboration and collegial support are also important to staff retainment, burnout prevention, and stress management (Spicer, 2016). Unified purpose, professional development and learning partnerships helps to promote ongoing learning amongst teachers and teacher effectiveness (Ozgenel, 2020; Tatlah et al., 2014). Furthermore, educational researchers have documented culturally responsive trauma-informed approaches to pedagogy as effective tools for promoting school climate, particularly in high poverty and racially

diverse schools (Blitz et al., 2020). These population characteristics are often observed in northern, rural schools (Scott & Louie, 2020).

Curriculum, Teaching, and Instruction

While the curriculum for secondary schools in Ontario has shown progress in diversifying content and providing increased flexibility (Bialystok et al., 2019; Norris & Bialystok, 2019), it is important to note that it remains standardized (Boyd & McShane, 2021). Ontario secondary schools have grades nine, ten, eleven, and twelve. All secondary schools have comprehensive education that equips students for graduation (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014). They also have specialization in Fine Arts, Science, or Technology. According to the Ontario Ministry of Education (2022), every student requires thirty credits, 18 of which are compulsory and 12 are optional. Students must earn the following 18 compulsory credits to get their Ontario Secondary School Diploma:

- 4 credits in English (1 credit per grade)
- 3 credits in mathematics (at least 1 credit in Grade 11 or 12)
- 3 credits for group 1, 2, and 3 courses (1 credit in each group)
- 2 credits in science
- 1 credit in Canadian history (Grade 10)
- 1 credit in Canadian geography (Grade 9)
- 1 credit in the arts
- 1 credit in health and physical education
- 1 credit in French as a second language
- 0.5 credit in career studies

- 0.5 credit in civics and citizenship

Students must earn 12 optional credits by successfully completing courses offered in their school's program and course calendar. Smaller northern rural schools face limitations in offering courses due to staffing constraints (Zeichner et al., 2017). Nevertheless, the flexibility of the provincial curriculum encourages creative and responsive teaching approaches (Norris & Bialystok, 2019) to address these limitations (Zeichner et al., 2017).

Furthermore, every student must pass the literacy requirement, earn at least two online credits and complete 40 hours of community involvement activities (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2022). Each school has student success teams composed of a principal, student success teacher, guidance counsellor, and special education teacher to support students who need it (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2022). The fundamental concept underlying the Ontario curriculum is for teachers to integrate standardized guidelines for each course, wherein students must achieve designated targets and meet expectations in order to receive credits (Zeichner et al., 2017).

To be effective in rural settings, innovative teaching and instruction should be student-centered, as this approach fosters high engagement (Langworthy, 2012; Shoulders & Krei, 2015). Innovative instruction is a quality teaching practice that fosters pedagogy with the following principles: personalized/individualized, collaborative, student self-regulated, knowledge building, and skilled communication (Fullan, 2011; Zeichner et al., 2017). Further, the most high-quality teaching methods focus on reciprocal teaching and problem-solving teaching, as well as personalized feedback on student's work, teaching self-questioning, and inspiring meta-cognition, (Fullan, 2011;

Hattie, 2009; Valentine, 2017; Zeichner et al., 2017). Improving engagement is crucial for enhancing attendance (Corbett, 2016), particularly among rural learners who often perceive the curriculum as irrelevant to their lives and lack support for their learning at home (Du Plessis & Mestry, 2019). Du Plessis and Mestry (2019) highlight that rural schools typically provide fewer elective courses such as art and computers and offer limited options for advanced placements compared to urban settings. Consequently, rural teachers exert considerable effort to generate high-quality educational outcomes for their students despite having significantly fewer resources available to them (Corbett, 2014/2015; Du Plessis & Mestry, 2019)

Assessment of Quality

Government leaders establish goals with quantifiable evaluation tools to assess the effectiveness of efforts aimed at improving quality. One of the most known tools to assess achievement is the Ontario Report Card (Cowley & Easton, 2019). The Ontario Report Card aims to provide guidelines to assess overall performance. It reports on seven performance indicators that sum up a score out of ten for any given school. The rationale for the use of the Ontario Report Card is the notion that assessment and evaluation form a critical tool for gauging student learning, development, and achievement, as well as classroom teaching (Parekh et al., 2018).

Another important tool is the Education Quality Accountability Office (EQAO). EQAO is a governing body that oversees standardized testing in Ontario at different levels and areas of education (OECD, 2021). Established in 1996, the institution creates tests to evaluate students' expected knowledge acquisition outlined by a particular grade's curriculum (OECD, 2021). It derives from the following seven indicators: 1) the

average level of achievement on the grade-9 EQAO assessment in academic mathematics; 2) the average level of achievement on the grade-9 EQAO assessment in applied mathematics; 3) the percentage of Ontario Secondary School Literacy Tests (OSSLT) successfully completed by first-time eligible students; 4) the percentage of Ontario Secondary School Literacy Tests successfully completed by previously eligible students; 5) the percentage of all the completed tests written by students at the school that were assessed either as unsuccessful (OSSLT) or below the provincial standard (grade-9 math tests); 6) the difference between male and female students in their average levels of achievement on the most commonly written grade-9 EQAO assessment in mathematics; and, 7) the difference between male and female students attempting the OSSLT for the first time in their rate of successful completion of the test. The outcomes of these tests are intended to provide accountability and estimate the quality of education in Ontario. There are several arguments against utilizing this measure to evaluate quality. Eizaridad (2019) has listed the following concerns about external assessment,

> as stereotyping is structurally violent for racialized children and those from lower socio-economic status as it serves to diminish their self-confidence, create doubt in their competencies, and in the long term leads to lower access to opportunities for upward social mobility through streaming into applied fields, over-representation in special education and dropout rates, and overall access to lower-quality education. (p. 175)

Further to this point, Kathleen Wynne's Liberal government launched an independent review of the EQAO in fall 2017 to assess its relevance and accuracy. The outcome of the review produced 18 recommendations to enhance and modernize the assessment to be equitable (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2018). While these recommendations have not been implemented yet, the EQAO continues to be the tool employed for quantifiable evaluation of quality. Conversely, Eizadirad (2020) proposes a shift in perspective from

perceiving students through a deficit lens to adopting a strength-based approach that considers their social, cognitive, emotional, developmental, spiritual, and academic needs within the context of their communities in a relevant manner. According to Corbett (2014), policies and tools developed at one spatial level function differently when applied in another context, and the disconnection between these levels results in the perpetuation of neo-liberalist ideologies and education inequalities. Hence, the concept of contextually relevant quality, as discussed by Eizadirad (2020), has the potential to measure and enhance quality in diverse spatial contexts.

The Ontario Report Card appears to provide parents and school leaders with information on the quality of education based on school performance. However, Eizadirad (2019) argues that policies and programs, such as the report card and the EQAO, perpetuate flawed measures for evaluating quality by failing to incorporate place-based considerations. The longstanding issue of rural education discourse revolves around the assertion that northern rural schools lack high-quality education. The standardized tool, such as the EQAO, designed for well-populated and adequately staffed schools, evaluates quality based on individual achievement in Ontario, without accounting for the contextual differences that various rural schools may present (Eizaridad, 2020). In her study, Salamondra (2020) contends that rural schools create an environment where students can thrive, characterized by strong connections with staff and increased student participation in extracurricular activities. She further highlights that these strong staff-student connections facilitate the development of interpersonal skills among students (Salamondra, 2019). However, this particular finding is not reflected in the quantitative data obtained from educational assessment tools, but it would be evident

if qualitative data were earnestly considered. Furthermore, a criticism here is that while the small schools create a safe environment wherein students thrive, they don't challenge students enough and don't prepare them for life outside the cocoon of family and community (Corbett, 2014b/2021).

Nonetheless, the educational outcomes reported by the EQAO in rural schools fail to align with the literature's depiction of quality education provided by rural educators. Standardized tools do not capture the nuances and strengths that rural schools offer (Parekh et al., 2019). The quality of teachers and schooling significantly influences educational outcomes for students (Martino & Rezai-Rashti, 2013). However, one must also consider the broader societal politics of redistribution in relation to rural education (Scott & Louie, 2020). In the following section, I discuss equity within the framework of geographic location and isolation, specifically focusing on northern rural schools in Ontario.

Equity and Inclusion in Northern and Rural Schools

The impact of educational equity and inclusion on academic outcomes remains significant (OECD, 2023). In Canada, the definition and framework for equity in education are established through collaboration between provincial/territorial governments and regional/local authorities (OECD, 2023). The Ontario Ministry of Education (2014) emphasizes that "the objective of equity in education is to identify, eliminate, and prevent systemic barriers and discriminatory practices, thereby facilitating students in achieving their full potential and enhancing student achievement" (p. 6). In Ontario schools, educational equity and inclusion encompass various factors such as "socioeconomic status, country of origin, race, gender, ability level, special needs, sexual

orientation, and accessibility" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009, p. 4). Schools face the challenging task of addressing these multiple dimensions of diversity as they strive to create equity and remove barriers for all students.

Equity Policies in Ontario

The most recent equity policy entitled the *Ontario Education Equity Action Plan* OEEAP (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2017a), which replaced the *Ontario Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy OEIES (2009)*, reflects the following goals for Ontario education: 1) achieving excellence, 2) ensuring equity, 3) promoting well-being, and 4) enhancing public confidence. The OEEAP to set forward a process to eliminate barriers for students who experience challenges and discriminations in institutional and instructional practices because of their differences. The provincial government was committed to detecting barriers for all Ontario students, and eliminating them by sharing amongst schools the current, evidence-based practices, programs and pedagogies to address all forms of discrimination (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2017a). As the *Equity and Inclusive Education (EIE) in Ontario Schools: Guidelines for Policy Development and Implementation* (2014) explains,

> We have come a long way towards realizing our vision of equity and inclusive education in Ontario schools. However, realizing that vision must be understood as a journey, not a destination. The work must be ongoing to ensure that our schools continue to provide caring, inclusive, safe, and accepting environments that support the achievement and well-being of every student. Equity and inclusive education are an ongoing process that requires shared commitment and leadership if we are to meet the ever-evolving, complex issues and concerns of our communities and schools. (p. 5)

While the OEIES in 2009 gave authority to local school boards to develop their own educational equity policies, the EIE (2014) and the OEEAP (2017) provided

guidelines to implement procedures to eliminate barriers. Regionally, the [selected school board] (2022) share their commitment to equity in their policy,

> in [the selected school board], we believe that all students can learn and our goal is to enable each and every student to learn effectively, to reduce achievement gaps and to improve learning outcomes for all, regardless of race, class, gender, ethnicity, disability, sexual orientation and other historical forms of marginalization. (p. 1)

Further in the document, they provide a focus for equity:

> The Board recognizes that equity of opportunity and equity of access to the full range of programs, the delivery of services, and resources are critical to the achievement of successful educational and social outcomes for those served by the school system as well as those who serve the system. (p. 1)

The equity and inclusion policy of the selected school board does not specifically address geographic isolation or location; instead it focuses on equity of opportunity and equity of access (selected school board, 2022). However, these statements are broad and allow for subjective interpretations.

In their research on equity policies in Ontario school boards, Shewchuk and Coopers (2018) discovered that the equity and inclusion policies across the 72 Ontario school boards lacked content addressing religious accommodation, antiracism and ethno-cultural discrimination, anti-discrimination procedures for 2SLGBTQIA+ students, gender identity, and socioeconomic status. Subsequently, in a follow-up study, the same authors found that while all 72 school boards had equity policies recognizing various forms of discrimination, only half of them reported on the efforts made to support equity (Shewchuk & Cooper, 2020).

Establishing Educational Equity

In Ontario, the concept of educational equity centers around promoting inclusive, diverse, and equitable education to ensure that every student has equal opportunities for achievement and success (OECD, 2023). Equity is defined as "a condition or state of fair, inclusive, and respectful treatment of all people" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009, p. 4), diversity is "the presence of a wide range of human qualities and attributes within a group, organization, or society" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009, p. 4). Inclusion is "education that is based on the principles of acceptance and inclusion of all students. Students see themselves reflected in their curriculum, their physical surroundings, and the broader environment in which diversity is honoured and all individuals are respected" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009, p. 4). Within this context, equity entails treating individuals fairly while acknowledging their unique differences, including factors such as geographic isolation, ancestry, culture, ethnicity, gender, gender identity, language, physical and intellectual ability, race, religion, sex, sexual orientation, and socio-economic status (Buffone, 2022). It is essential that these dimensions of diversity are incorporated and considered in all environments (Buffone, 2022).

In addition to students themselves, teachers and teaching staff play a crucial role in removing barriers and combating exclusion within schools (Morin, 2022). Equity and inclusion can be achieved through the proactive efforts of teachers, as it is their responsibility to foster inclusivity (Moriña & Orozco, 2021). Equitable teachers ensure that every student has the opportunity to learn based on their individual needs and promote respect for one another, regardless of their differences (Brennan et al., 2021; Lawrie et al., 2017). By employing inclusive pedagogies, equitable teachers create a

supportive environment that allows students to emancipate and transform as they engage in the learning process (Morina & Orozco, 2021). However, it is important for equitable teachers to engage in regular professional development to enhance their ability to create a learning space that promotes acceptance, kindness, and inclusion (Florian & Camedda, 2020; Morin, 2022; Woodcock & Hardy, 2017).

Efforts towards equity and inclusion are an ongoing process, requiring continuous attention and action (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014). Merely having a policy in place is insufficient without regular assessment and proactive measures (Shewchuk & Cooper, 2018). Gorski (2017) proposed an equity literacy framework where ongoing work can be achieved following his protocol:

> the ability to *Recognize* subtle and not-so-subtle biases and inequities in classroom dynamics, school cultures and policies, and the broader society, and how these biases and inequities affect students and their families; the ability to *Respond To* biases and inequities in the immediate term, as they crop up in classrooms and schools; the ability to *Redress* biases and inequities in the longer term, so that they do not continue to crop up in classrooms and schools; and the ability to *Create and Sustain* a bias-free and equitable learning environment. (p. 20)

By adopting this perspective, the pursuit of equity and inclusion necessitates a proactive dedication from school staff (Buffone, 2022). It is only through this proactive commitment that schools can effectively evaluate and address equity-related concerns as they emerge, and make necessary revisions (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014).

Creating an environment that promotes principles of equity and inclusion is one of the key strategies for fostering a proactive commitment from staff. In their discussion, Gorski and Swalwell (2015) outlined five key principles that embody educational equity and inclusion. These principles include:

1. The direct confrontation principle, which advocates for openly addressing and confronting biases;
2. The redistribution principle, which emphasizes restoring access and opportunities to those who have been marginalized;
3. The prioritization principle, which urges schools to prioritize the needs of students by evaluating policies and procedures through an equity lens;
4. The equity ideology principle, which underscores the importance of adopting an ideological commitment to equity as a guiding lens;
5. The #Fixinjustice not kids' principle, which emphasizes the need to focus on eliminating conditions of injustice rather than attempting to "fix" individual students.

These principles collectively shape and inform efforts to achieve equity and inclusion in schools.

Gorski and Swalwell (2015) propose principles that embody an ideological stance promoting equity, while Gorski and Pothini (2018) provide an equity literacy framework that guides educators in incorporating practical steps. To cultivate cultural responsiveness in their teaching, educators must actively address inequities prevalent in the school context, including poverty, socioeconomic status, religion, ethnicity, culture, race, sex, gender identity, gender expression, disability, sexual orientation, language, and immigrant status (Gorski & Pothini, 2018). It is important to acknowledge that biases may intersect across these dimensions.

Accordingly, Gorski and Pothini (2018) outline steps for educators to follow: first, identifying biases and inequities; second, considering multiple perspectives; third,

examining potential challenges and opportunities; fourth, envisioning equitable and just outcomes; fifth, brainstorming short-term solutions; sixth, brainstorming long-term salutation; and last, crafting an action plan (Gorski & Pothini, 2018, p. 13). Implementing these principles and framework is crucial in the northern rural context to foster equity (Campbell, 2021).

Similarly, to promote equity in schools, Shewchuk and Cooper (2020) proposes three essential steps. First, there must be a commitment to quality leadership from schools, boards, and the Ministry of Education. Second, school boards need to establish and implement an Equity and Inclusion (EIE) policy, along with procedures and practices that foster positive learning environments for all students. This involves implementing measures such as "religious accommodation procedures, anti-discrimination and harassment procedures, inclusive curriculum and assessment practices, and capacity-building for education professionals (Shewchuk & Cooper, 2020, p. 922). Third, individual schools are responsible for creating a school climate that aligns with their EIE policies, including engaging stakeholders and the community in building capacity (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014; Shewchuk & Cooper, 2020).

Gleason and Berg (2020) contend that equitable education takes an unbiased and consistent effort from schools and their staff to build capacity in equity. They recommend three types of practices "emerging as starting places for this work: knowing students and families, inquiry-based teaching, and expanding student agency and choices" (p. 8). Similarly, Arakal (2020) argues that the pandemic provided space to relook at how, what and for whom education is delivered. Therefore, flexibility in teaching and instruction may provide greater academic achievement. de Klerk and Palmer (2021) recommend

schools implement the following flexibility in their courses to create equity in access: 1) ensure access to resources by broadcasting educational activities to complement online programmes; 2) connect with stakeholders to enhance virtual learning; 3) encourage improved communication and participation by teachers and parents; and 4) a robust implementation of blended education. Achieving equity in schools isn't as forthright as it seems, it is a continuous work that changes and evolves in time and space.

In the literature, researchers have provided recommendations to foster equity in schools. For instance, Martino and Rezai-Rashti (2013) propose focusing on the intersections of gender, race, social class, culture when considering the equitable distribution of educational resources and quality. They suggest that the Ontario Ministry of Education should prioritize these factors over numerical indicators to establish and assess equity.

Similarly, Peterson et al. (2018) offer a practical approach to addressing equity. Through qualitative research on northern rural and Indigenous teachers' experiences and perceptions of rural teaching and teacher education, they identified key themes. One theme highlighted the strong sense of community and support among rural teachers, but also revealed a significant lack of consistent access to material and human resources. Another theme emphasized the expectation that rural teachers extend their roles beyond the classroom.

Based on the outcomes of Peterson et al.'s (2018) study, several recommendations emerge. There is a need for better preparation of rural students who transition to urban centers for post-secondary education. Additionally, rural teachers should be equipped to educate teacher candidates on contexts to provide hands-on experience. By incorporating

these recommendations into policy and practice, northern rural schools can take significant steps towards achieving equity.

The ongoing debate surrounding equity as either a system of rules and policies or a continuous process aimed at achieving a goal has been extensively examined in social science research (Ryan, 1956). Additionally, due to the close relationship between equity and excellence (Campbell, 2021), it becomes apparent that the revised understanding of equity encompasses both a systemic approach and an ongoing process (Ainscow, 2020). It is important to note that equity is not an absolute concept, and its evaluation is subjective (Ainscow, 2020). Objective measures such as the PISA and EQAO tests, which aim to assess equity, fall short in capturing its true essence (Sahlberg, 2021). Therefore, an equitable school not only implements equity policies but also ensures its existence of equitable procedures (Ainscow, 2020). Moreover, it utilizes knowledge mobilization to evaluate the effectiveness of its equity efforts (Shewchuk & Cooper, 2020) and emphasizes the value of inclusive education as a means of providing high-quality schooling that benefits all grounds and contributes to our collective future (Sahlberg, 2021).

As Sahlberg (2021) suggests, "true and lasting improvements in our educational systems will only occur when society as a whole acknowledges the importance of education excellence through greater equity and recognizes that equitable education can benefit everyone, not just a select few" (p. 17).

Equity Issues in Northern, Rural Schools

Determining the presence of equity in schools through standardized achievement tools is not effective. Campbell et al. (2018) raised concerns about the tests lacking

"cultural relevance and bias, lack of attention to Indigenous knowledge and ways of knowing, and appropriateness of modifications for students with Special Education Needs, language learners and newcomers to Canada" (p. 19). Schools are using inequitable measures to investigate equitable outcomes, which indicates that school boards and government are not getting accurate depiction of equity issues in schools (Campbell, 2021). Inequities exacerbated in northern, rural schools are related to multiple factors.

Shewchuk and Cooper (2020) highlight three key areas of inequity that are magnified within schools: 1) material disparities encompassing family income and housing; 2) educational achievement gaps; and 3) health disparities. Additionally, Pelletier et al. (2020) assert that sociocultural factors, including health inequities, significantly influence educational experiences in northern rural and remote communities. These health inequities arise from inadequate access to consistent healthcare and barriers to physical activity (Pelletier et al., 2020). Furthermore, Mayor et al. (2019) delve into how race, culture, religion, and family structure also contribute to the experience of education inequities.

In Canada, our education system grapples with various diversity-related issues, including 2SLGBTQIA+ inclusion (Airton, 2018), accessibility for students with disabilities (Stephens et al., 2015), digital and technological advancements (de Klerk & Palmer, 2021), Indigenous graduation rates (Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada, 2017), and the literacy skills of English Language Learners (Han & Cheng, 2011). Consequently, equity issues affect a multitude of students due to the inadequate accommodation of our multicultural society within the current education system.

Furthermore, gender, racial, and linguistic equity concerns persist in Canadian schools. Steeves et al. (2010) observed gender and racial dimensions in their study, which examined equity through a racialized and minority lens. They found significant disparities in academic scores between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students in rural settings. Similarly, Bouchamma and Lapointe (2008) explored equity from linguistic perspective and discovered that French-speaking students in minority environments fared worse academically than those in majority settings. Using academic achievement as an indicator of educational success, Edgerton et al. (2008) revealed an uneven distribution of educational attainment across socioeconomic status, gender, and region.

Tutors (2015) suggested that many rural students are diverse despite the historic assumption that rural communities are homogenous. She adds that misconceptualization of diversity contributes to the exclusion by 1) 'othering' everyone else outside of the dominant group; 2) attempting to assimilate those who do not have the same views as the dominant group; and 3) providing handouts to the 'other' group instead of hand-ups. The literature on diversity and inclusion in northern rural schools suggest that teachers play a central role in the atmosphere of the schools (Tuters, 2015). Further to this point, Wimmer et al. (2008), presented the extent to which homophobic behaviour occurred, which was often, and the frequency of intervention by teachers, which was not often. The research team conducted an empirical investigation of the school climate for 2SLGBTQIA+ youth in a secondary school in Saskatchewan, and discovered that in the presence of homophobic slurs, teachers only intervened 25% of the time. Some schools in Canada have prioritized establishing goals of diversity amongst teaching staff. Wallin

(2007) found that in a Manitoba school division, a school board worked tirelessly to apply for grants to

> develop programs to meet student need and diversity issues, and the division also developed an Aboriginal Education Committee whose mandate was to serve the needs of the large proportion of Aboriginal students in the division, with an attendant focus on creating PD opportunities for staff on diversity, Aboriginal world views, and inclusion of Aboriginal content. (p. 15)

Put together, the published articles suggest that teacher action and inaction towards diversity and inclusion contribute to the overall culture of safety in northern rural schools.

With the advent of the COVID 19 pandemic and much of the world turning to virtual and online learning, the issue of digital equity for northern rural schools has come to the forefront. Many studies demonstrate how internet connectivity (Haynes, 2022), lack of equipment (Corbett, & Helmer, 2017) and low broadband (Bennett, 2013) can negatively influence student learning outcomes (Rowley et al., 2020). For example, Gleason and Berg (2020) argue that COVID 19 revealed the ongoing inequities in access to digital learning platforms, "some students had uninterrupted access to the basic needs of daily life and remote learning requirements such as devices, internet, and a supportive learning environment, while others did not." (p. 18). Further, de Klerk and Palmer (2021) highlight that infrastructure does not necessarily mean access; they found that even though rural schools are assumed to be more digitally connected due to their use of distance education, many students were not digitally fluent. A lack of digital fluency created an additional layer of divide for those living in rural communities. Chinembiri (2020) stated that the difference in digital literacy amongst teachers and learners was one of the biggest obstacles to inclusion during the pandemic. Czerniewicz et al. (2020) proposed that the issues of equity and inequality in remote teaching and learning during

the pandemic was a combination of discernible factors that educational leadership and governments must contend with moving forward. The most substantial findings in their study were that those who were already disadvantaged became even more so during the pandemic, and it became visible to all that equity issues are embedded and perpetuated in the contexts (Czerniewicz et al., 2020).

Internationally, several countries such as the United States of America, China and Australia have investigated the role between rurality and lack of equitable education (Campbell, 2020; McQuaide, 2009; Perry, 2009; Tufts, 2017). Perry (2009) conducted a cross-national study looking at 12 different countries within the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) to find characteristics of equitable systems of education. She created a typology of equity and found that Finland and Canada have the most equitable student outcomes, and Germany and the US had the worst. However, criticism by educational advocates argue that the standardized measures for educational equity in Canada are too narrow to grasp the true picture of equitable education, as the instrumentation itself fails to capture other ways of knowing for non-white and multilingual individuals (Campbell, 2020). In the US, a correlational study on improving literacy achievement in rural schools found that access to high-quality education in rural communities had the potential to mitigate the effects of poverty, tackle high unemployment, low wages, and monotony (Tufts, 2017). Another study by Croft and Moore (2019) conducted in the rural US found similar barriers to equitable education as found in rural Canada, including quality internet connectivity and extracurricular activities (Wang, 2018).

Furthermore, the engagement barriers for students in northern, rural secondary schools in westernized and non-westernized countries were incredibly similar. Examples of these barriers are long distances to travel to and from schools, high poverty, hunger, underdevelopment, lack of basic services such as water, a lack of qualified teachers, multi-grade teaching, unreasonable teacher-learner ratios, and irrelevant curricula (Bhatnagar & Das, 2014; Boyd, 2011; Boyd & McShane, 2021; Hlalele, 2012; Mollenkopf, 2009; Sauvageot & da Graća, 2007; Walker, 2019). According to a study by Walker (2019), ten Indigenous youth from rural Australia between the ages of 15-25 were interviewed about their experiences that lead to their disengagement from the rural boarding school and their aspirations for the future. The findings on the main barriers to engagement were "family and community life, relational issues at school, their own feelings, drugs and alcohol and exclusion; while their future aspirations included place-based employment and connection to the community" (pp. 65-66).

Northern, Rural Student Voices in Equity Research

Existing research indicates that rural youth are disadvantaged, but they are not powerless (Edington, 1970; Zarifa et al., 2018). Disadvantaged youth can develop analytical skills that result from critical consciousness-raising (Cammarota, 2007, 2011). In fact, past research demonstrates an association with critical consciousness and improved mental health, better occupational attainment, positive academic outcomes, critical literacy and reading skills, and increased civic engagement for oppressed youth (Asakereh & Weisi, 2018; Diemer, 2009; Diemer & Li, 2011; El-Amin et al., 2017; Kunnath & Jackson, 2019).

In Ontario, studies that include youth perspectives on equity in rural contexts are limited as most studies included only principal and teacher perspectives (Mayor & Suarez, 2019; Tuters, 2015; Wallin & Newton, 2014). Northern rural youth face barriers that influence their academic learning and thus, improving access and removing the aforementioned barriers may help solve equity issues. Existing studies conducted on equity in rural education are limited. The proposed resolution to bridge the gap in literature is to promote school policies that improve school environment and teacher sensitivity (Wimmer et al., 2008), provide procedures for equity efforts (Shewchuk & Cooper, 2020), improve technology and digital fluency and access (Haynes, 2022), and offer a robust blended and culturally responsive trauma informed curriculum (Arkal, 2020; Harrison & Skrebneva, 2020). Rural educators are pressing for more equity efforts within the schools to address the issues, while providing substantive relevant ideas to contribute to reducing the divide (Corbett, 2020; Biddle & Azano, 2019; Scott & Louie, 2020). Finally, equity in northern, rural schools is both a process and a system (Arakal, 2020). It involves policies, procedures, and high-quality schooling (Sahlberg, 2020) with a culturally relevant curriculum that keeps pace with an accelerated world and the needs of the learners (OECD, 2023). As this section discussed equity issues in northern and rural schools, the next section discusses the literature that has attempted to resolve such issues.

Models and Policies

Educational leaders debate on the implementation of place-based knowledge in existing educational literature. Educational researchers consider rural education issues a "wicked problem" to solve for government and administrators (Reid, 2017; Vinson et al.,

2015). A term coined by Rittel and Webber (1973), wicked problems are social planning problems that are resistant to traditional linear and top-down approaches. Wicked problems have a history of persistent policy failure and lack an umbrella solution to rectify them because they are usually socially complex and fluid (Reid, 2017). Lowan-Trudeau (2017) does not fully agree that rural education issues are a wicked problem. Instead, he builds on Kassam et al.'s (2017) cognitive diversity concept to build diverse approaches that reflect local knowledge and teachings in education. They argue for the inclusion of local knowledge that disrupts the standardized curricula. To be effective "science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) education . . . must be embedded in the habitat of children, Indigenous, rural or otherwise" (Kassam et al., 2017, p. 98). Because wicked problems are highly context-dependent, Kassam (2010) suggests that including local experiences and identities from each given context can combat the challenges in rural schools. Despite research that demonstrates the effectiveness of locally developed education, or place-based education, curriculum continues to be developed in the core of provinces, and by the government (Greenwood, 2009; Lowan-Trudeau, 2017).

Policies in education are centralized (Agbo, 2011), siloed (Kassam et al., 2017) and reductionist (Reid, 2017). This results in ineffective policy implementation in varying contexts, including rural and remote schools. There is a significant trend in intersectional literature considering spatial marginality in policies, including locality or geographic disadvantage (Reid, 2017). The idea of spatial marginality begins with the model of rural deprivation developed by Shaw (1979) that has been used to influence policy on rural problems. The model includes three different levels of deprivation. First,

is household deprivation, which are problems related to income and housing; second is opportunity deprivation, which are problems related to jobs and services; and the third is mobility deprivation, which are problems related to the ability to mobilize and move around from communities to cities. This model has been successfully applied to other social sciences areas, such as geography, for social planning in rural contexts to address issues (Harrington & O'Donoghue, 1998), but not in educational policy making thus far.

In January 2017, Ontario released an *Ontario Rural Education Strategy* (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2017a). The strategy stemmed from a discussion paper that illuminated the need to consult communities before school consolidation or closures because of their fundamental role within rural communities. Part of the requirements of the strategy was to consult ten cities in Northern Ontario to seek their perspectives on how to serve students more effectively and make the best use of public resources. The strategy identified three key themes: 1) supporting public use of school space; 2) decision making about school closures; and 3) supporting education in rural communities. Concerning the third key theme, the strategy indicates that:

> Education in small rural schools can [be] advantageous for students and is working well in many places… [In addition] there is a need for greater equity in access to transportation options, mental health and other services and educational programming opportunities. (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2017a, p. 3)

Later in 2017, another strategy called, a *Plan to Strengthen Rural and Northern Education,* was released (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2017b). Minister of Education, Mitzie Hunter, stated:

> When rural students are provided with meaningful opportunities for an excellent education, rural communities thrive . . . students in rural and Northern communities would benefit from additional targeted support with the flexibility to address the unique needs of each community. We also heard about how our

> publicly funded education system must do more to engage communities and pursue shared use of space when making decisions about the future of schools. (p. 1)

The outcome of this initiative saw the implementation of a rural and northern education fund that would ensure funding for specific changes in rural schools. The changes would provide rural and northern communities in Ontario access to e-learning and a minimum broadband speed of one megabyte per second, per student in each rural population over the next four years. It would also ensure better access to dedicated support such as special needs, mental health, and behavioural support. Finally, it would expand experiential learning through the Career Kickstart Strategy. However, even with these improvements, a superintendent in northern Ontario stated: “To some degree the Education Minister listened to us, but there's still a long way to go to provide equal funding for all school boards in Northern Ontario” (Thompson, 2017, p. 1). Unfortunately, because of governmental changes, the funding was not extended beyond the 2018 school year (Ontario Public School Boards Associations, 2018). The cancellation of funding is concerning because it effectively halts any progress rural schools have made.

Summary

This section delves into the existing body of research on equitable rural education, emphasizing the absence of youth perspectives in these studies. The disparities in northern rural schools contribute to a learning divide between different educational settings, and despite efforts by various governments to address these issues, they persist and present additional challenges for rural youth (Azano & Biddle, 2019). In the subsequent section, the conceptual framework of the study is presented, which serves as the foundational framework for knowledge construction (Grant & Osanloo, 2014).

Chapter 2 of the dissertation provides a comprehensive review of the literature on equitable rural education in northern rural schools and contexts. Moving forward to chapter 3, the conceptual framework is introduced, representing a critical component of doctoral research (Grant & Osanloo, 2014). It functions as a blueprint that contextualizes the entire research project (Berman, 2013; Grant & Osanloo, 2014).

Chapter Three: Conceptual Framework

The rural disadvantages in education are oppressive issues, and it makes the most sense to address their intersection with education and critical consciousness theory (CCT). In this context, CCT is applied differently from typical structural analysis in critical theory. The macro level analysis of power and societal structures of inequality is constructed on a micro level with participants through the critical reflection and critical action of their lived experiences of educational equity and inequity in rural education. Its added appropriateness for this study stems from my own positionality as a Social Worker and researcher who adheres to consciousness-raising praxis.

Key Components of Critical Consciousness Theory

Critical consciousness, also known as conscientization or *conscientização* in Portuguese, is a multifaceted and complex theory. There is no agreed upon method to actualize critical consciousness in practice (Freire, 1973/2000). The way I conceive of critical consciousness theory in my research is as a framework that highlights oppressive systems and challenges them through awareness and action; and as a theory that serves to understand and analyze social experiences. As outlined later in this section, rural communities experience marginalization through the function of being 'othered' (Howley & Howley, 2010).

Critical consciousness comes from a definitive text on critical pedagogy by Paulo Freire. Freire (1973/2000), a Brazilian educator and philosopher, and leading activist for critical pedagogy developed the theory that stems from the notion that "*conscientização* represents the idea of becoming aware of social, political, and economic inequities and taking action against these oppressive systems of reality" (as cited in Azano & Biddle,

2019, p. 4). He argues that the "fear of freedom, of which its possessor is not necessarily aware, makes him see ghosts" (p. 36). The fear of the oppressed acts as a barrier to fighting back against the oppressor. As such, Freire (2000) believes that educators and education can serve as sites for critical awareness wherein learning would foster the process of liberation. Before I draw on the theory and its concepts for my research, I explain the relevance and historical context for critical consciousness as the blueprint for this study.

Freire's (1973/2000) educational theory was developed with impoverished and rural communities to help them read and write. Freire believed that learning occurs when the person engages with the world to develop a sense of agency, and by transforming their understanding of the objective world, they are able to enact changes to those objective conditions (Freire, 1973/2000). Choi et al. (2015) explain:

> Freire (1973, 2000) believed there were different levels of consciousness, such as magic consciousness (i.e., a belief in a superior power and lack of awareness of injustice in one's life), naïve consciousness (i.e., awareness of problems yet distorted perceptions about the relations between oneself and reality), and critical consciousness (i.e., integration with reality and understanding of casual and circumstantial correlations between oneself and reality). (p. 27)

Freire (1974) believed that oppression occurs when you objectify humans and subsequently remove their ability to transform their world. Therefore, the person remains in magic consciousness (Freire, 1973/2000). He believed oppressors engage in this process of "blaming the victim" whereby they redirect blame for their acts of oppression onto the oppressed (Freire, 1970/2008). An example of this is blaming northern rural individuals for being poor, arguing that they are lazy and only if they worked hard enough would they overcome their socioeconomic status. Furthermore, naïve consciousness exists when the oppressed become aware of the objective and materialistic

world that existed outside of their own consciousness (Freire, 1974) but failed to attempt to enact change (Freire, 1973, 2000). He believed that a critical consciousness was developing when the combination of critical reflection and action took place through conscious and transformative steps to act against these conditions (Freire 1973/2000). Freire (1973) asserted the significance of critical consciousness in shifting the oppressed from objects to subjects, as his epistemological perspective acknowledged knowledge as fluid, subject to change in different times and spaces. He emphasized the importance of problem-posing pedagogy as a tool to foster conscientization or critical consciousness (Freire, 1970/2008). Applying the concepts of critical consciousness theory, I utilize the notions of fear, freedom, oppression, and authenticity to comprehend the various manifestations of being marginalized and excluded experienced by northern rural communities.

Northern rural communities can experience various forms of fear and oppression. It is important to note that the experiences of fear and oppression can differ based on the specific context, cultural dynamics, and historical factors (Young, 2014). When rural communities act based on fear and oppression, it translates into an apprehension to self-govern and self-advocate, and seeking leadership from the provincial and federal state on topics like socioeconomic challenges, marginalization of Indigenous communities, political marginalization, limited access to healthcare, educational disparities, social isolation, mental health and discrimination and stereotyping, and more recently, the climate change (Galway & Beery, 2022; Jackman et al., 2010).

Fear and Oppression

I have structured this research based on Freire's (1970) theory of critical consciousness. Thus, I frame this study within the theoretical premise that northern rural communities experience oppression. Drawing from Young's (2014) framework of oppression, I conceptualize how oppression hinders emancipation and transformation of these communities. Additionally, considering the significant economic industry shift required to mitigate catastrophic climate change, northern rural communities possess untapped potential that can be unraveled through critical consciousness, serving as both a medium and a framework. Critical consciousness can play a pivotal role in empowering and supporting these communities. First, I elaborate on how fear and oppression contribute to the unequal distribution of power, perpetuating a situation where social institutions highlight a few, while constraining the majority (Young 2014).

Northern rural communities often encounter numerous challenges, including limited economic opportunities, insufficient access to essential services, and inadequate infrastructure. In May 2023, a northern, rural community was compelled to close the doors of its Emergency Medical Services due to fiscal constraints. The closure was a consequence of Thunder Bay city council's controversial approval of the Superior North Emergency Medical Services master plan, which aimed to amalgamate several EMS bases operating in the North Shore areas (Fleury, 2023). Despite concerns expressed by the communities during a survey and information gathering session conducted by the city council earlier this year, EMS closed its doors, and replaced it with a hybrid model involving first-response and community healthcare, wherein a community paramedic assumes a more active role in promoting community health (Fleury, 2023). The closure

left many communities without local emergency response teams, and expanding the scope of practice for other surrounding emergency teams from the surrounding communities. The closure has had a significant impact on many communities of the Superior North, leaving them without local emergency response teams and necessitating an expansion of the scope for emergency teams in the surrounding areas.

This example illustrates how marginalization occurs through the exercise of structural power (Young, 2014). Furthermore, the powerlessness experienced by the affected community members in the face of public policy decisions and their implementation aligns with Young's (2014) description of such processes as "hierarchical, imposing rules on both bureaucrats and citizens" (p. 21). The limited decision-making power in northern rural communities' manifests in limited access to health care, specialized health care, limited healthcare facilities, long distances to hospitals, and a lack of health care professionals. This can contribute to fear and oppression related to health inequities, inadequate treatment options, and increased vulnerability to health risks (Buffone, 2022; Freire, 1970/2007; Wilson et al., 2020).

Geographical remoteness and limited social connectivity are additional factors that contribute to social isolation and difficulties in accessing mental health services. Feelings of loneliness, lack of support networks, and inadequate mental health resources can intensify the fear and oppression experienced by individuals in relation to mental health issues (Buffone, 2022; Freire 1970/2007; Wilson et al., 2020). Moreover, there is the fear and oppression of being perceived as a dependent person, as individuals who are "old, poor, or mentally and physically disabled often face patronizing, punitive, demeaning, and arbitrary treatment" (Young, 2014, p. 19). This reality is particularly

significant for individuals residing in northern and rural communities, where a health disadvantage increases the likelihood of chronic illnesses and poorer health outcomes, reinforcing the fear and oppression related to dependency.

The marginalization of Indigenous communities is the most profound injustice for northern rural communities. Historical and ongoing colonial policies, land and resource loss, cultural erasure, and inadequate government support are among the factors contributing to marginalisation, discrimination, and oppression experienced by these communities (Tuck & Yang, 2012; Wilson et al., 2020). Discrimination and stereotyping perpetuate an environment of fear, exclusion, and systemic oppression for many Indigenous people. As Young notes, "marginalization is perhaps the most dangerous form of oppression" (Young, 2014, p. 18).

Addressing these challenges poses a perplexing dilemma. Education was once believed to hold the key to uplifting underprivileged communities and helping them transcend their circumstances (Darder et al., 2017). However, educational disparities persist in northern rural schools, characterized by restricted access to quality education, a dearth of qualified teachers, and insufficient resources (Scott & Louie, 2020). These disparities exacerbate feelings of fear and oppression, fostering a sense of hopelessness rooted in the limited educational opportunities and diminished prospects for personal and professional advancement (Freire, 1970/2008).

Freedom and Authenticity

The concepts of freedom and authenticity from critical consciousness theory is applied to northern rural communities in several ways. First, the notion of freedom can

empower individuals in these communities to challenge oppressive structures and systems that limit their agency and opportunities (Darder et al., 2017). By developing critical consciousness, community members can recognize and resist oppressive norms, policies, and practices that hinder their freedom to fully participate and thrive (Freire, 1973). This can involve advocating for equitable access to resources, decision-making processes, and social services that promote their well-being and self-determination.

Second, the concept of authenticity encourages individuals in northern rural communities to embrace and celebrate their unique identities, cultures, and perspectives (Freire, 1970/ 2008). However, rural local knowledge is different from Indigenous knowledge and traditions (John & Ford, 2017). Indigeneity is rooted in the sacred values passed down through thousands of years of 'original instructions', encompassing local knowledge, traditions, and ways of life. In contrast, rural local knowledge has its origins in a century of settler colonization that unfolded alongside the ideals of manifest destiny and westward expansion (RedCorn et al., 2022). These historical events orchestrated by the Europeans settlers classified people based on race and status, often relegating them to the periphery of the country, while stealing their land for profit, power and control (Corbett, 2021). While Indigenous knowledge and traditions have frequently been marginalized or devalued in prevailing narratives, rural local knowledge has not suffered the same fate (John & Ford, 2017; Tuck & Yang, 2012). Therefore, it is important to disentangle the two, and in this context, I refer to authenticity rooted in Indigenous knowledge and traditions, not rural local knowledge from the lens of settler colonialism.

Last, critical consciousness can help individuals reclaim their authenticity by challenging stereotypes, cultural erasure, and discriminatory attitudes (Darder et al.,

2017). This can foster a sense of pride, belonging, and cultural revitalization within the community. Moreover, by cultivating critical consciousness, individuals in northern rural communities can engage in critical dialogue and reflection to better understand their own experiences of oppression and the interconnected systems that perpetuate inequities (Young, 2014). This process allows them to develop a collective awareness of social, economic, and political disadvantages they face, and to collectively strategize and work towards transformative change (Freire, 1973). Rural communities can transform into agents of change by focusing on the strengths of their communities and the "core-periphery relationships on education" to challenge the existing narratives about rurality (Azano & Biddle, 2019, p. 6). Through this lens of critical consciousness, they can identify and challenge their power imbalances, advocate for equitable policies, and engage in actions that promote social justice, autonomy, and dignity (Young, 2014).

Rural communities can embody the concepts of freedom and authenticity by prioritizing their own needs and challenging the biases ingrained in decision-making processes by dominant structures (Young, 2014). This transformative process, known as praxis (Azano & Biddle, 2019), combines action and reflection, allowing individuals to actively engage in authentic practices that foster freedom and liberation (Freire, 2009). Through praxis, rural communities can disrupt oppressive systems, challenge societal norms, and advocate for their rights and well-being. By critically reflecting on their experiences, engaging in collective action, and continuously reassessing their strategies, northern, rural communities can cultivate authenticity and advance towards greater freedom and self-determination (Darder et al., 2017; Young, 2014).

Critical Consciousness Studies

Extensive research has been conducted on the development of critical consciousness among disadvantaged youth, with a particular emphasis on childhood and adolescence (Cammarota, 2016; Diemer & Li, 2011; Diemer & Rapa, 2016). However, it is worth noting that these studies have predominantly focused on urban contexts. They have explored the positive outcomes associated with the emergence of critical consciousness, including individual and collective awareness of systemic oppressions and the subsequent actions taken to address them (Diemer & Li, 2011; El-Amin et al., 2017; Godfrey & Burson, 2018; Godfrey et al., 2019; Watts & Hipolito-Delgado, 2015). While these findings provide valuable insights, there is a need to expand the research scope to include rural and other non-urban settings, as the experiences and challenges faced by disadvantaged youth in these contexts may differ significantly.

Scholars have previously embedded the social process of critical consciousness within their research endeavours. For example, Carlson et al. (2006) conducted a study with lower income and African American youth in an urban setting, which found that photovoice was effective in generating cognitive-emotional interpretations that moved the participants out of helplessness and into an active civic engagement role. Critical consciousness has been deemed an asset and a resource to people who are marginalized (Diemer et al., 2016). This could be viewed as a tool to help participating youth (Cammarota, 2016; Hill et al., 2020; Rapa et al., 2018) to conceptualize northern and rural equitable education by reflecting on existing inequities and acting against inequitable elements (Diemer & Li, 2011). Not only will the social process help the youth

who participate in the study, critical consciousness will amplify awareness of elements of marginalization for rural youth.

In this study, the principles of critical consciousness-raising are applied through the concepts of fear, freedom, oppression, and authenticity. These principles are operationalized through three key components: 1) critical reflection, involving the engagement of participants in critical analysis of equities and inequities during photovoice orientation, interviews, and focus groups; 2) political efficacy or critical motivation, which pertains to the perceived capacity of individuals to effect change, explored through individual interviews and focus groups and 3) critical action, which encompasses engaging in activities aimed at creating change, specifically within the context of photovoice (Watts et al., 2011). The application of critical consciousness theory is particularly relevant to this study, as it focuses on northern rural youth who are not only geographically isolated and spatially marginalized but also likely to face racialization, poverty, and poorer health outcomes (Dupéré et al., 2019; Little, 2006; Corbett, 2016).

An assumption of this study is that urban-normativity is active in the context of this study. Critical consciousness theory is used in this study as a framework to assist in bringing to the forefront multi-systemic oppressions maintained by processes, practices, and institutions rooted in urban-normativity (Jemal, 2017). Fulkerson and Thomas (2016) refer to urban-normativity as the tendency of placing urban norms in the center and rural needs in the periphery. Urban-normativity as a system of oppression has been demonstrated earlier in this thesis as a system responsible for many of the issues for equitable rural education, including ignorance of rural perspectives and experiences.

Connecting Freire's (1970/2008) process of praxis, consciousness raising on urban-normativity through participant reflections on their experiences is necessary for critical change to occur. I asked problem posing questions (Freire, 2008) in individual interviews, photovoice and focus groups, which elicited thoughtful answers. I was reflexive and adopted an inquiry stance, rather than an expert stance, to allow reflection on the phenomenon (Plunkett et al., 2013) and enlighten action via photovoice.

The goal was to elicit the transformative research process (McNiff, 2017). A transformative research process refers to a systematic approach to research that aims to create meaningful and significant changes in individuals, communities, or society (McNiff, 2017). It goes beyond traditional research methods and seeks to challenge existing systems, structures, and norms by promoting social justice, equity and empowerment. In a transformative research process, the focus is not only on producing knowledge but also on actively engaging with stakeholders, particularly those affected by the research topic. It involves collaboration, dialogue, and participation to understand and address social issues, inequities, or oppressive systems. I aimed to empower youth by promoting their agency and giving them a voice in shaping the research agenda and outcomes (Tilley, 2016).

Furthermore, the transformative research process involved participants engaging in observation and reflection of their experiences within a northern rural school context. Any inequities that emerged were highlighted and amplified using photovoice. The participants evaluated their photographs and made modifications as necessary throughout the data collection phase. To encourage enhanced reflection, I posed questions such as "What new insights have you gained from this experience?" throughout the data

collection process.

Upon completion of the data collection phase, the social action phase unfolded, allowing the participants to determine their subsequent actions. Although I was not directly involved in this phase as part of the research scope, previous studies have displayed various social action approaches. For instance, some researchers facilitated the creation of digital stories (Greene et al., 2018), while others organized exhibitions in school gymnasiums where participants displayed their photographs alongside narratives (Rose et al., 2018). Additional social action efforts included collective educational activities such as video production and organizing open forums, inviting community knowledge keepers to share their perspectives (Agbo, 2003). Although I encouraged social action, I did not lead this aspect of the research project. As a researcher, I recognize the significance of the social action phase in fostering critical consciousness development (Freire, 1970/2008). However, due to the pandemic, organizing a photo exhibition posed challenges, prompting participants to choose individual routes for critical action through social media while preserving their photovoice images. In the subsequent chapter, the appropriateness of the chosen methodology is discussed, drawing on previous studies that have employed interpretative phenomenological analysis in conjunction with photovoice as a research method.

Critiques of Critical Consciousness

While Paulo Freire's concept of critical consciousness has been influential in educational and social justice contexts, it has also faced several critiques. Some of the interpretations of critical consciousness have critiqued Freire's critical consciousness theory as they argued that it relied heavily on an individualistic focus of liberation rather

than a macro level transformation (Diemer et al., 2021). Freire's framework tends to focus on individual consciousness and liberation, neglecting the structural and systemic dimensions of oppression. Diemer et al. (2021) contend that addressing social injustices requires not only individual empowerment but also collective action and systemic change. Another important critique is that critical consciousness focuses on economic oppression and class struggle, while overlooking other forms of oppression such as race, gender, and intersectionality (Jemal, 2017). To improve the theory, a more comprehensive analysis of power would provide the necessary reflection to multiple oppressive structures.

Another critique is that Freire appropriated and universalized his Brazilian context and experiences, suggesting that his theory may not adequately account for diverse cultural, historical, and social contexts (Diemer et al., 2021). Furthermore, they argue for the importance of contextualizing critical consciousness within specific cultural and historical realities. Finally, critical consciousness does not adequately address the power dynamics between educators and learners (Jemal, 2017). Jemal (2017) argues that educators can inadvertently reinforce their own biases and dominant ideologies, which may hinder the development of genuine critical consciousness among learners. These critiques do not negate the value of Freire's work but rather seek to expand his ideas to address these concerns and enhance their applicability in diverse contexts (Darder et al., 2017; Jemal, 2017).

Critical Consciousness and Equity

Critical consciousness theory intersects with equity by providing a framework to understand and address systemic injustices and power imbalances. Critical consciousness

theory emphasizes the recognition of societal structures and the ways in which they perpetuate inequality and marginalization (Freire, 1970). It encourages individuals to develop a critical awareness of these structures and their own social positioning within them.

Equity, on the other hand, focuses on promoting fairness and justice by ensuring that everyone has access to the necessary resources, opportunities, and support to thrive (Gorski, 2016). It seeks to eliminate disparities and create an inclusive society where all individuals have equal chances of success. When critical consciousness theory intersects with equity, it helps individuals and communities recognize and challenge the underlying causes of inequities. By fostering critical awareness, individuals can identify and confront systemic barriers, biases, and prejudices that perpetuate inequality (Cammarota, 2016). This understanding enables them to advocate for and implement policies, practices, and interventions that promote equity and social justice.

In summary, critical consciousness theory enhances equity efforts by empowering individuals to analyze and challenge oppressive systems, institutions, and ideologies. It provides a lens through which individuals can recognize and address the root causes of inequity, leading to transformative actions that promote fairness and justice (Cammarota, 2016). Within this research context, northern rural youth can transform through critical consciousness by engaging in a dual process of objective and subjective evaluation of their realities.

Summary

In chapter three, I highlighted critical consciousness theory (Freire, 1973/2000) as it provides the framework for this study. I contextualized oppression for northern rural

communities, and framed my study through the lengths of fear, oppression, freedom, and authenticity. Additionally, I discussed how critical consciousness and equity intersect to provide a framework for this research. In chapter four, I discuss the research methodology in-depth to provide the parameters for the study. I include the methodology, data collection methods, procedure, and data analysis. The last part focuses on the issues of trustworthiness, ethical considerations, and COVID 19 pandemic restrictions.

Chapter Four: Methodology

In this chapter, I contextualize the methodology employed in the study, encompassing my personal and cultural background, the research design and procedures employed to collect data, and the data analysis approach used. I commence by presenting my personal and cultural introduction, which holds significance as it establishes the framework in which I am positioned.

Personal and Cultural Introduction. I establish three essential contextual markers in this introduction. Firstly, I emphasize my self-awareness, shaped by the intersectionality of identities as a middle-class, white, francophone, settler woman, who is able-bodied, heterosexual, cis-gender, and adheres to the Christian Catholic faith. Therefore, I acknowledge my influence as a white, middle-class researcher pursuing a graduate degree while not residing within the community I chose for the study. Second, although I no longer live there, I am originally from the community that I selected for this research. I will outline the rationale later in this introduction; nonetheless, there are both advantages and disadvantages to making this decision. I acknowledge the impact this decision may have on participant recruitment. Nevertheless, it could be argued that a potential drawback lies in my personal motivation to address the inequities I encountered as a rural youth and how this might influence my interpretation of the findings. Finally, I recognize that I have firsthand experience as a "rural youth." This personal background has underscored the importance of reflexivity in my research process. It has motivated me to actively confront and put aside any preconceived ideas or biases, especially considering how rural communities change and evolve over time and in different geographic contexts.

At times in the analysis phase, I found myself meticulously reviewing and revisiting scripts to ensure that my interpretations captured the essence of meaning and not what I thought they meant. Many times I would highlight scripts with the intention of later discussing them with the youth participants for clarification. In sum these three markers enhanced my trustworthiness as a researcher in this study by situating myself as an actor in this study.

As I have established, I have historic and present ties to the community under study, as much of my immediate and extended family continue to live there. I chose this community because I had credibility in the community, and I was aware from experience that this community setting was ideal in terms of diversity in population (francophones, Anglophones, Indigenous and Newcomers). From a pragmatic lens, my prior knowledge of the community served as an asset to the research study. I acknowledge this advantage in a very transparent way.

I have knowledge of the community because I grew up here. I did not attend the high school selected for this research, as I was a francophone. In 2005, I moved away to pursue my post-secondary education and never came back. I return to visit family and friends often, and when I do, I notice that the town has changed and many families that I once knew are no longer there as they have moved away, leaving a sense of disconnection. It feels different. It appears that the shared sense of unity and togetherness I experienced in my formative years have eroded. Instead, the community now grapples with the pervasive impact of systemic issues such as drug addiction, human trafficking, poverty, and mental health challenges. However, I question whether or not the community struggled with those issues back then too? Was I just sheltered from it all?

The community has significantly changed over the years, as any rural community would in time and space (RedCorn et al., 2022). For example, I remember growing up feeling a sense of safety and privilege as I navigated the town streets with my friends playing a made-up game. We would pedal our bikes around town, pretending to be in Mexico until it was dark; doors of our houses and cars were unlocked, neighbours helped one another out, and we enjoyed the freedom to share suppers at each other's homes without fear of judgement. The community had a big heart, or so it seemed from my lens.

As an actor in this research, I reflect back to my own position of privilege in the community but also in the school system, both past and present. Growing up my privilege lied in how I excelled in school, had a nuclear family with married parents, had nutritious food provided at each meal and new clothes each September; and I was white. The latter is a profound privilege that I did not conceptualize until I was sitting in a first year Social Work policy class listening to the professor talk about Peggy McIntosh's, white privilege: unpacking the invisible knapsack (McIntosh, 1989). I was sitting in the front row of a lecture hall in Ryan Building of Lakehead University travelling back in time recalling being in grade 7 in an elementary school within the community selected for this study and having a different recess than the Indigenous students at the time. Apparently the white and Indigenous students were fighting too much and the principal uttered the words: "Separate but equal" and the solution to separate recesses ensued based on race and ethnicity. For context, this was in 1999. The rest of the memory has faded, however, the feeling of sadness and confusion that I couldn't see my friend during recess still haunts me today.

As I was a previous resident of this community, and now, a graduate student engaged with research in the selected high school, I am aware of the influence I wield. In truth, it makes me uncomfortable when I visit the community, and people greet me with comments like, "You're going to be a doctor now," rather than engaging in the casual conversations about the day-to-day happenings that used to occur before my doctoral studies. The prestige associated with a doctorate degree has altered the way people in my community perceive me. As someone who considers herself a lifelong learner, I grapple with the influence that conducting graduate research carries. Nonetheless, my humility, stemming from my own skillset in contrast to the expert knowledge I seek from my participants, enables me to maintain a sense of modesty. My participants are the expert in their perceptions. This value redresses the discomfort I feel when I am perceived as prestigious or intelligent.

I am a person and researcher committed to humility in relation to both the school and the community, I remained reflexive and reflective throughout the entire research. Yet, it was crucial for me to recognize my privilege, acknowledge the power differential that does exists regardless of my discomforts, and remain mindful of my positionality within this research.

My Calling to the Research Problem

When I entered the doctoral program in 2018, I sought to understand how inequities are formed, perpetuated and maintained by immersing into the depths of social, economic and political agendas of status quo. As a Social Worker who specialized in clinical counselling for regional clients in Northwestern Ontario, I was compelled to advocate and disrupt the systems that discriminated, oppressed, and silenced my clients.

As an educator, I sought to inspire future social workers, igniting their passion for social justice and ensuring they were well-prepared to navigate power structures and systems, and avoiding perpetuating harm by joining a system that continues to be philosophically grounded in individualism and conservatism. Inherently, as a lifelong learner who strives for social justice in all of my multiple personas, I actively resist and work against the status quo that perpetuate inequities based on markers of identity: race and ethnicity, socioeconomic status, gender, etc. For me, developing my critical consciousness is reflecting on how the social, political and economic elements have shaped my lived experiences. Ultimately, my hope was to contribute to the development of the participants' critical consciousness as it relates to equity and inequity so that they aren't in university when they realize their privilege or lack thereof.

As previously mentioned, I approach this study from a white, settler, heterosexual, middle class, and university-educated lens. I am a Francophone. I am a mother to two beautiful children who are part Indigenous. I am a partner to an Indigenous man that supports me endlessly. I am an avid fictional reader and writer who refuses to publish due to imposter syndrome. I am a caretaker and intellect that re-centers herself in my home community with the fresh air of the woods and the gravel under my feet. Finally, I am a lifelong learner who values knowledge, community, curiosity, and peace; all of which are transferable to my role as an insider and researcher and to the topic under study: equity and inequity in rural education.

The topic of equitable education in rural communities is important to me as an individual and researcher because I was born and raised in a small, rural, and northern town in Northern, Ontario. I was once a rural youth attempting to navigate the

complexities of learning, preparing for post-secondary options, and developing my identity in a northern rural setting. I was always aware that there was inequity between urban schools and my high school as well as between students. I saw it firsthand on the very few occasions that I visited urban schools for extracurricular activities. I also experienced a lack of guidance, as most students in my cohort were encouraged to take teaching, nursing, or medicine routes in post-secondary, or enter trades via apprenticeship. Social science courses (psychology, sociology, law, etc.) were never suggested. It was only when I spoke with urban colleagues attending the same program at l'Université d'Ottawa that I realized the advantage urban students held over those of us from rural and northern schools. As I completed an undergraduate and subsequently, a graduate degree in Social Work, I became aware of the structural oppression that favour some individuals over others.

Although I am from a rural community, I am currently living in an urban context with the luxuries that come from such a location. My ongoing interest in rural education is in part because my family of origin continues to live in a very small northern and rural community. Despite the vested interest in rural education, I wholeheartedly exercised reflexivity and authenticity throughout the research process. I ensured this by academic journaling, regular consultation with my supervisor and committee, and active self-reflection on a daily basis. In addition, I am already familiar with and regularly engage with these strategies as a psychotherapist.

I examined and presented my positionality as an individual and researcher to the research participants, academic community, and any future audience because research is neither impartial nor objective. I actively considered factors such as culture, power, and

societal structures to unpack oppression and the power dynamics, especially during the data collection and analysis phases (Secules et al., 2021). My awareness of privilege and bias is very important in order to practice transparency and reflexivity. Moreover, maintaining a commitment to neutrality and fairness, although acknowledging that complete objectivity is unattainable in research (Tilley, 2016), is crucial during the data collection process. This approach serves to mitigate potential biases, emotional influences, and undue guidance that may undermine the validity and reliability of the research findings (Holloway & Billey, 2011). An essential aspect of this research pertains to my personal connection with the area where the study was conducted. This dual role as both a researcher and a past local carries advantages and risks (Acker, 2001; Merton, 1972). Being an insider facilitates the establishment of rapport and trust with the participants, which are crucial elements for conducting a robust interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) study (Valentine et al., 2018). Nonetheless, the drawback of insider status is the potential introduction of unconscious biases and preconceived notions rooted in my experience within the research context during the data collection and analysis phases (Creswell, 2014). To mitigate these risks, I employed the photovoice method in conjunction with participants' narratives, which encouraged their interpretations of equitable rural education, thus diminishing the influence of my own assumptions.

Methodology

In order to explore the issue of equity in education from the perspective of underrepresented groups, such as northern rural youth, qualitative research methods are encouraged (Corbett, 2016). In this study, interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA)

was chosen for the methodology, as it recognized the significance of the contextual factors that influence participants' interpretations of their own reality (Yardley, 2000). The data collection process involved utilizing multiple sources, including photovoice, individual interviews, and a focus group. To analyze the gathered data, a framework for IPA developed by Smith, Larkin, and Flowers (2009) was applied, encompassing the examination of individual interviews, field notes, photovoice sessions, and focus group data.

The methodology is upheld by the interpretative analysis of perceptions of equity and inequity of their experiences in the isolated milieu borrowing from critical consciousness theory of Paulo Freire. Tensions exist between interpretative phenomenology and critical consciousness theory as interpretative phenomenology does not impose pre-existing theoretical frameworks but develops them from the data itself (Noon, 2018), while critical theories like CCT typically critiques the broader structural and systemic factors that underlie individual experiences (Creswell, 2014). It prioritizes the examination of power dynamics and social injustices. However, I grapple with the macro level analysis on a micro level, as the participants are the analyzers of their context. I respected their critiques and amplified their voices, rather than relying on the structural analysis that is commonly associated with traditional critical theory. In his work Paulo Freire was not forthcoming in providing a prescribed method to apply this theory into research and education (Freire, 1973). Therefore, I applied critical consciousness theory to uphold the interpretive analysis of participants' critiques of their context. The rationale is connected to the objectives of the research.

The objectives of this research were to answer the overarching question of how do youth aged 15-18 experience educational equity in their isolated milieu, but I also asked about the barriers of their education. Therefore, I needed both an interpretive methodology and a critical framework for the participants to situate, interpret and situate themselves in their contexts as they made sense of and interpreted their own experiences in order to critiques them. Only this way would the answers to the research questions be fulfilled. In other words, I was seeking to evoke their critical analysis of their experiences with equity and barriers within their scope of influence and awareness through critical reflection, and elucidate their critical analysis of transformation through their critical actions, whether it was with their photovoice or plans for the following year on how to develop more equitable solutions for their education.

In sum, the methodology is suitable for this research as it presents the perspectives of youth attending the *selected high school* on barriers and strengths to an equitable northern rural education in an isolated milieu. The research was guided by the question: How do northern, rural youth ages 15 to 18 years old experience educational equity in a geographically isolated high school? In this chapter I discuss how I organized the research to answer the central research question by elaborating on the study's design, its rationale and assumptions, positionality, data sources, context of the high school, my role as researcher, participants, data collection, data management plan, time frame, data analysis, trustworthiness, and ethics protocol.

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)

Smith and Nizza (2022) argue that IPA was developed as an experiential method for a proximal examination of a participant's experience. The innovative research design

was born out of a need in the field of counselling psychology to understand complex human phenomena that classic quantitative methodology could not capture (Noon, 2018). Theoretically, it is grounded in phenomenology's philosophical approach. IPA is a unique form of qualitative research because it borrows from psychological, idiographic and interpretive concepts to create meaning for participants (Sadler, 2016). Although Husserl is the founder of phenomenology, IPA was developed by Jonathan Smith in the early 20th century because of the work of Martin Heidegger, an existential phenomenologist (Smith & Nizza, 2022). IPA is an attempt to conceptualize phenomenology as an interpretative endeavour (Smith & Nizza, 2022). As an inductive methodology created to uncover the essential structures of the lived experience of a phenomenon (Valentine et al., 2018; van Manen, 1997), "IPA can capture the experiential and qualitative . . . by engaging with the reflections of people's life experiences" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 35). In effect, the researcher is trying to make sense of the participant trying to make sense of what is happening and how it is happening through a detailed examination (Smith et al., 2009). According to Smith (2011),

> IPA is experiential, as we have seen. The analysis of what participants say is carried out to learn about the participant's cognitive and affective reaction to what is happening to them. As I have stated (Smith, 1996), IPA believes in a chain of connection between embodied experience, talk about that experience and a participant's making sense of, and emotional reaction to, that experience. (p. 10)

The value of utilizing this methodology is that I am able to implement participatory methods, such as photovoice, to collect data by amplifying the participants' voices without compromising the parameters of the methodology. Guba and Lincoln (1994) suggest the importance of ensuring methodological congruence with philosophical

assumptions to ensure research quality. I established trustworthiness through triangulation in the blending of methods (Morse, 2015).

The overarching purpose of the photovoice method is to reveal oppressive structures and elicit emancipatory change (Plunkett et al., 2013); however, IPA makes no such claims as it is used to develop a deeper understanding of the participants' lived experiences and subsequent meaning of the experiences (Noon, 2018). In this research, I brought together the purpose of photovoice and IPA by utilizing photovoice as a method to elicit youth perspectives and developing critical consciousness, and by utilizing IPA to create an understanding of their experiences of equitable rural education as expressed through both photo and interview mediums (Plunkett et al., 2013; Noon, 2018; Sutton-Brown, 2014).

Interpretive paradigms tend to rely on semi-structured interviews as their source of data (Creswell, 2014; Guba & Lincoln, 1994), whereas critical paradigms often rely heavily on collaborative processes and subjective values. Combining IPA and photovoice allowed me to critically engage with participants while eliciting their lived experiences in a way that created meaning for participants. IPA methodology is necessary to interpret the deeper meaning of equitable rural education and photovoice is the medium for change regarding the inequities and strengths revealed.

Theoretical Underpinnings

Positivist researchers have challenged IPA as a valid methodology for its assumed weak theoretical underpinnings (McGaha & D'Ursu, 2019). Yet, its focus on convergence and divergence, and precise examination of detail and nuanced experiences with a small number of participants has led this methodology to grow in popularity

amongst researchers beyond the field of psychology (Cuthbertson et al., 2020). According to Nizza et al. 2021), there are indicators of quality in IPA studies, including a "clear focus on phenomenology, and solid idiographic depth and hermeneutics" (p. 4). The phenomenological underpinnings of this study coincide with Heidegger and Sartre's combination of existentialism and Merleau Ponty's embodiment where people are immersed in their current world of language and social relationships by interweaving the history of all understandings (Cuthbertson et al., 2020). According to Merleau-Ponty, embodiment refers to the way in which our body is not merely an object but is an active and integral part of our experience. Our body is not a separate entity from our consciousness or the world around us; it is through our body that we perceive, engage, and make sense of the world (Cuthbertson et al., 2020). In a northern rural context, youth are endeavouring to make sense of their access to equity within the realm of education. They are simultaneously interpreting how their own experience of equity compares to that of others, both in the present and in the past.

A strong IPA study has a focus on idiography, where there is a commitment to a "detailed analysis of a phenomenon under investigation . . . where each case is carefully examined for nuances followed by a cross case analysis" (Cuthbertson et al., 2020, p. 4). I achieved the process of divergence and convergence by unraveling each of the narratives of the lived experience by reading and re-reading transcripts, looking for linguistic criteria, descriptions and patterns, themes, discrepancies, and outliers (Shinebourne, 2011). The last theoretical underpinning of IPA is hermeneutics (Cuthbertson et al., 2020). In IPA, hermeneutics refers to the philosophical approach and method of interpretation used to understand and make sense of individuals' lived

experiences (Smith et al., 2009). It involves engaging in a process of interpretation and understanding by examining the meanings and subjective experiences that individuals attribute to their own experiences (Cuthberson et al., 2020). Hermeneutics in IPA allows researchers to delve into the rich, nuanced, and contextual aspects of educational equity to uncover the underlying meanings and interpretations that shape their lives (Smith et al., 2009). The process of understanding necessitates the use of presumptions and interpretations (Moran & Mooney, 2022). In order to interpret a phenomenon, participants must possess the ability to comprehend and derive meaning from it. In the context of this study, I engaged in a process of double hermeneutics, where I interpreted the participants' interpretations of equitable rural education (Cuthbertson et al., 2020; Smith et al., 2009).

Rationale

In selecting the most appropriate methodology, I considered case study and ethnography. However, as my research question focuses on exploring lived experiences of a small sample of students; combined with ongoing COVID 19 restrictions that prevented direct contact and site access, case study and ethnography were ruled out given the research question and restrictions to data collection methods. I selected IPA methodology for this study for three main reasons. Firstly, IPA is a qualitative research method that can be used to examine how participants understand complex, ambiguous and/or emotionally heavy topics such as equity and to help them reflect on lived experiences related to oppression (Smith et al., 2009). In other words, this methodology enhances the opportunity to explore the perspectives and experiences of the participants

on equitable rural education, while also generating critical reflection and social action from the lens of participants to bring about change in real time.

Secondly, IPA has theoretical roots that complement the researcher's ontological perspective and research purpose. IPA has its roots in Heidegger's interpretive tradition of phenomenology (Noom, 2018). It draws on phenomenology, hermeneutics and idiography with a focus on particular experiences of a particular people (Smith et al., 2009). According to Noon (2018), IPA has three important concepts. First, the phenomenological component of IPA lies in its attempt to understand and explore the subjective meanings of individuals' experiences (Smith et al., 2009). Second, the hermeneutic component of IPA is present when the researcher makes sense of the participants making sense of their lived experience. Finally, the idiographic component of IPA is in the:

> detailed and in-depth examination of how individual persons in their unique contexts make sense of a given phenomenon; it seeks to learn from each participant's individual story, and through deep, individualized analysis, a more informative understanding of participants' thoughts, beliefs and behaviours are attainable. (Smith et al., p. 76)

Finally, IPA offers flexibility in the choice of research methods, allowing researchers to select the most appropriate ones to fulfill the research objectives (Noom, 2018). In my study, I opted for a unique pairing of the photovoice method with an IPA methodology, which may be considered unconventional (Payne, 2017). The methodology was instrumental in creating critical reflection among participants and critical action through their photographs (Sadler, 2016).

Phenomenological Assumptions

Phenomenology uncovers, describes, and makes sense of a particular lived experience (van Manen, 2016). This research is an avenue to understand the lived experiences of northern rural youth as they pertain to equitable rural education at the *selected high school.* The first assumption is that the exploratory nature of this study allows the participants to be able to provide a thorough perspective of the equitable rural education phenomenon through their lived experiences in the milieu (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). The second assumption is that phenomenological research is subjective and not generalizable (van Manen, 2016). The third assumption of phenomenology is that everyone has a different perception of reality because reality is a social construct (Creswell & Poth, 2016). The final assumption is that the researcher has preconceptions, and it is necessary to reveal them, as they are necessary to understand the participant's view (Eatough & Smith, 2008). As such, I included the study's assumptions upfront.

Role of the Researcher

In qualitative research, the researcher serves as a human instrument for data collection (Simon, 2011). Consequently, participants should have knowledge about the researcher with whom they will be engaging (Simon, 2011). As I have presented my personal and cultural information, in the forthcoming section, I explicate my role as a researcher and my positionality.

My role as a researcher is to collect relevant information to understand the participants' lived experiences (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). As the study unfolded, my role began as etic and gradually became emic (Simon, 2011). In other words, the role of observer evolved into observer-participant through social action as part of the research

process through the photovoice, interviews and focus group (data collection). I conducted one-on-one interviews and a focus group, either face-to-face in person or virtually through Microsoft Teams, Skype, or Facetime platforms (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998). Both the interview and focus group process provided greater insight into the meaning of participant photos and lived experiences (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998). I followed up and checked in with participants via telephone to ensure the progression of the study and to answer any queries participants might have.

Positionality

I am a social worker who practices psychotherapy. During the last decade, I have had the opportunity to work with a variety of children, youth, and adults in rural and urban settings. As a collaborative therapist, I have come to realize that people must make sense of and heal their issues by getting to the core of the underlying problem, and then building on their strengths to overcome their struggles. My role as a collaborative therapist is to work with clients as they interpret the meanings and essence of their struggles. In other words, I seek to understand their strengths and issues to interpret their problems and find solutions or acceptance. This process is akin to double hermeneutics in the interpretative phenomenological analysis method (Smith et al., 2009). My professional work has helped shape my view on how individuals construct their reality and truth based on their lived experiences, in their attempts to understand the world within which they live, resulting in the absence of a single objective or universal truth. Capturing the meaning, the history, the understandings, and co-constitutions that we all make is the foundation of how people make sense of their lives (Benner & Wrubel,

1989). For these reasons, my ontological perspective is congruent with qualitative research methods.

Method

Given the limited knowledge about youth experiences of equitable rural education in the literature, I chose qualitative methods of investigation. My research question called for a qualitative research design because I wanted to understand the youth's perspectives and lived experiences of attending a northern rural high school such as the *selected high school* as it pertains to equity. I selected the photovoice methods in the hope that could help develop critical awareness and critical action throughout the research process.

Context of the Selected High School

In recognition of my commitment to honour and respect the participants and the school, as well as to follow the ethical considerations of this study, I have opted to maintain the anonymity of both the community and the selected high school. Consequently, providing an extensive history and demographic profile is regrettably not feasible due to these constraints.

This research required a specific context, one that is isolated, northern, and rural. I selected a high school that is situated in a community in Northern, Ontario. According to Statistics Canada (2017), the community that *the selected high school* is situated in is characterized as northern, rural, and remote. I selected the community for a few reasons: first, it contains the population diversity I want for the participant sample—Indigenous, Francophone, and Anglophone people; second, I am familiar with this community, which enhances rapport building and facilitates the research process; and third, I am not an

alumnus of that school, which helped me separate my experiences as a rural youth from theirs.

The community is an amalgamated municipality and home to 5,000 people spanning 3,172 square kilometers (Municipality of selected community, 2014). The community is composed of 13 smaller communities. Although the region's history can be traced back to the fur trades of the 1600s, the community itself was established when settlers discovered gold, transported pulpwood through lakes, and constructed a railway, thereby stimulating the local economy (Anonymous, 2021). This historical narrative, shadowed by the impact of colonization, highlights the community's consistent dependence on key sources of employment, primarily centered on gold mines, railways, and wood industries.

The research unfolded in a *selected high school* that is situated on the traditional lands of the 1850 Robinson Superior Treaty (Anynomous, 2007). This township is situated in the central realm amidst neighbouring First Nations and communities, with distances ranging from 30 to 80 kilometers between them. The *selected high school* is an English Public High School that was built in 1937 (Anonymous, 2023). The selected high school underwent significant changes over the years. In 1981, it amalgamated with a separate French board, offering French secondary schooling, effectively combining two distinct high schools into one institution. However, in 1997, the French board of education established its own French high school in a nearby community, reverting the selected high school to its original form as an English public high school. In 1998 and 2001, two high schools were constructed under federal authority, with the aim of providing education to Indigenous students in the adjacent First Nation communities

(Anonymous, 2007). However, funding, staff recruitment and retention, and low pupils contributed to the closure of one of the two high schools (Anonymous, 2023). Currently, there are three remaining high schools in the amalgamated community: one, the *selected high school*; two, the high school for one of the First Nation communities in the area, and; three, the French public high school. The remaining high school for First Nations, Métis and Inuit peoples continues to operate for residents of the one First Nation community who wish to attend this school (Anonymous, 2023). Alternatively, any Indigenous youth from this community who wish to attend their local high school can do so, while students from the remaining First Nation communities have the option to attend either the selected high school or the French public high school, depending on their preference.

The *selected high school*, which is part of a larger school board, offers in-person learning specifically for English-speaking youth. With a total of seventeen teachers and several support staff, it is considered a small secondary school. The student enrollment is just under 200, comprising of students residing both in the heart of the community and those living up to 80 kilometers away. The school is almost one hundred years old, and it has been the consistent high school since the community formed under its colonized name.

The selected high school works closely with the surrounding First Nations as many Indigenous students from their First Nation communities attend the selected high school. I engaged with all surrounding First Nations by sending a community engagement letter (Appendices D, E, F, G, H). The letter outlined the scope, purpose, and goal of my research, and served as a potential avenue for collaboration in my study. I

established rapport and addressed any potential questions by following up with a telephone call to each chief and council.

Participants

Informed decisions about sampling are critical for effective and rigorous research (Suri, 2011). I determined the sample size based on the desired research goal and research design (Creswell, 2014; Maxwell, 2013). I chose purposive sampling for this qualitative study. According to Patton (1980),

> The logic and power of purposeful sampling lie in selecting information-rich cases for study in depth. Information-rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the inquiry, thus the term purposeful sampling. Studying information- rich cases yields insights and in-depth understanding rather than empirical generalizations. (p. 230)

Purposive sampling is employed to ensure the collection of data that is relevant and significant to the proposed research question (Saunders, 2012). This sampling method proved effective during the pandemic, as it allowed me to seek assistance in identifying potential participants while adhering to government health mandates in place at the time. Given that the research design aims to emphasize a more profound experience within a smaller sample size (Smith et al., 2009), the target sample size was set at four to six participants. Consequently, I purposefully selected five participants to achieve a diverse and purposeful sample, enabling a more comprehensive understanding of the lived experiences in rural education (Smith et al., 2009). The selected sample of participants, which the vice principal and principal were vital in helping me to select, was optimal for convergence and divergence (Suri, 2011). Among the youth who were interested in participating in this research, I selected two males and three females who consented to the entirety of the research study.

The first step of recruitment was to identify the criteria representative of the targeted population that I was seeking. Therefore, I used criterion sampling to provide consistent parameters for potential participants (Creswell, 2013). The participants needed to live in a rural town for at least 2 years and be between the ages of 15-18 years inclusively. Lastly, I sought a heterogeneous sample and therefore, I invited participants from various towns, cultural and linguistic backgrounds within Greenstone. Five rural students participated in this study, three of which identified as women, and two as men. Three identified as white, and two identified as Indigenous or part Indigenous. Their age ranges were from 15-18 years at the time of data collection. Three students were in grade twelve, expected to graduate in June 2022, one student was in grade ten, and one student was in grade nine. Participants chose their own pseudonyms. Participant pseudonyms and demographic characteristics are presented in Table 1.

Conducting research during a pandemic, particularly within the confines of a small school, necessitated my engagement with the teaching staff during the selection process. This approach, while practical given the circumstances, introduced an inherent limitation: selection bias. Selection bias may have influenced the results of this study. However, the realities of this research setting precluded the attainment of an ideal sample, thereby rendering the impact of selection bias on the participant pool given the

reach of the teachers.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Grade	Race/ethnicity
Table	Female	16	10	Caucasian
Astro	Male	17	12	Indigenous
Jay	Male	17	12	Caucasian
Butterfly	Female	17	12	Indigenous
Cookie	Female	15	9	Indigenous

Data Sources

I was able to adapt the IPA framework (Smith et al., 2009) to the rural education setting and use preferred and optimal data collection methods (Jeong & Othman, 2016), which in this case are interviews, focus groups, and photovoice. Photovoice shares the perceptions and voices of the participant through photo elicitation (Wang & Burris, 1994/1999). I chose photovoice because it is a creative and engaging option for the participants and provides a deep understanding of the studied phenomena by using multimodal data methods. I chose semi-structured interviews and a focus group because verbal information allows for the process of critical reflection and critical action to unfold naturally.

To achieve triangulation, I followed a specific procedure to conduct this research. First, I offered an introduction to the research; second, I conducted semi-structured individual interviews; third, participants began the process of photovoice; and fourth, I held a focus group follow-up session with all but one youth to provide space for

reflection on the meaning of their experience. One youth, Astro, did not want to participate in the focus group, but contributed to the individual interview and photovoice. They also began to discuss their critical action in this focus group.

Unique Considerations

The pandemic presented several challenges to this research because during different times of the data collection phase, there were varying restrictions on conducting face-to-face research. In consultation with my committee and with the selected school, we decided to collect most of the data using Microsoft Teams. I chose this virtual platform because the youth were already using it and comfortable with it. Microsoft Teams is also data encrypted and approved by their governing school board. In sum, I conducted data collection within the constraints of government health protocols and followed all necessary precautions. I obtained Research Ethics Board (REB) approval from Lakehead University prior to data collection and followed the guidance of the selected school. I collected data for this research study between February and May 2022.

Virtual Constraints. I expected barriers to arise during data collection due to the reliance on technology and internet connectivity. As discussed earlier in relation to issues of equity, many rural towns have inconsistent internet capacity, which has the potential to delay or interrupt the orientation, training, and data collection processes. Apart from two occasions where the internet "froze," the connections were stable. Another potential issue was ensuring confidentiality and privacy at the participant locations. Not all students have access to personal devices or privacy at home or school, which introduced the possibility of other people being in the room while participating in interviews and the focus group. As such, I encouraged participants to use earphones and go to a quiet space

to conduct the interview to enhance confidentiality. All but one participant chose the special education room to conduct their individual interviews. One participant was home at the time of their interview because they had missed the school bus. The final potential challenge was regarding the photovoice and social action component, as there were government-mandated restrictions for social distancing and gatherings. The photovoice component was unaffected as the youth were able to take their photographs without violating any restrictions; however, the social action phase was affected.

Data Collection Sequence

The research process began with a review of existing relevant literature to a more concisely defined research question, which led me to IPA in order to understand, through participatory methods, what equitable rural education in a northern rural context means to student-youth. I achieved triangulation by gathering my data in a specific order. Phase I of the research was the development of the research method, to become familiar with the *selected school* and obtain ethics approvals from Lakehead University and the *selected school*, as well as community engagement with First Nation 1, First Nation 2, First Nation 3, First Nation 4, and First Nation 5. Phase II of the research was data collection. I followed an adapted format of the six-step outline by Plunkett et al. (2013) that met the needs of the participants: 1) orientation and education; 2) photovoice to engage participants in a process of creating representations of their lived experiences of their formal education; 3) check-in with participants one week after initial conversation, during this time, I set up one-to-one virtual semi structured interviews; 4) semi-structured interviews where I honed in on a focused life history related to the phenomenon being studied; 5) photo narration; 6) focus group that brought the narration to their photos,

allowed for reflection on the meaning of their experiences and enabled broad themes to be developed collectively.

I recorded all audio data from the photovoice orientation, individual interviews, and focus group to ensure accuracy. I used a transcribing software in tandem with the audio recorder to transcribe the audio data in real time. After each interview, I listened to the recording and reviewed the transcribed material to fix any errors and reflect on the interview itself. I took interview notes and added them to the transcribed documents as needed.

Photovoice

Humans experience reality and the world via multiple sensory experiences, and visual imagery can convey a depth of lived experience beyond what words can express, particularly for populations not versed in the jargon of the phenomenon being studied (Brunsden & Hill, 2009; Pickin et al., 2011). I also selected participants that were between the ages of 15-18 years of age, and the extent of vocabulary at this age is varied (Just & Carpenter, 1992). Further, this research had the potential to elicit memories of lived experiences from the past at an age when their vocabulary was even more limited while the emotion of the experience remains (Pickin et al., 2011). I used photovoice in this study to illustrate and understand the participants' lived experiences with equitable rural education. Photovoice allowed participants to present ideas that they might not have had the vocabulary to describe; and second, because of its inherent purpose. Photovoice is a transformative tool for empowerment, positive social change, and a medium to convey lived experiences (Holloway & Biley, 2011).

Photovoice intends to give each participant a sense of control over what they want to share regarding their lived experiences (Wang & Burris, 1997). The process takes place in the participant's hand by producing images and words to activate crucial dialogue that depicts their awareness of what is necessary to improve and strengthen their community (Brake et al., 2012; Freire 1970/2008; Wang & Burris, 1994/1997). The procedures of photovoice rely on participants taking photos of events, people, and objects from their everyday lives with a focus on aspects they wish to see improved (Wang, 1999). The goal of photovoice is to be an action-oriented catalyst as both the researcher and the participants can benefit from the findings (Wang & Burris, 1997).

The effectiveness of photovoice with youth to challenge hegemonic discourse has been documented in the literature (de los Rios, 2017; Malherbe et al., 2016). Photovoice has been successful in capturing the strengths and issues present in school environments with adolescents whose first language was not English (Wilson et al., 2007) and with participants with younger developmental ages (Sutton-Brown, 2014).

Photovoice shares philosophical roots with hermeneutics and phenomenology (Sutton-Brown, 2014). Hermeneutics is interpretative by nature because it focuses on the meaning of experiences and the accumulating effects on the individual (Sutton-Brown, 2014). Phenomenology focuses on describing and understanding a social phenomenon by concentrating on the meaning of the experience (Pickinn et al., 2011). IPA shares these same roots (Smith et al., 2009), thus making photovoice an appropriate technique for eliciting data (Brunsden & Goatcher, 2007 as cited in Pickinn et al., 2011).

The combination of photovoice and phenomenological inquiry through IPA was used to elicit a holistic understanding of a phenomenon. Previous IPA studies that have

adopted photovoice as a method focused on the researcher interpreting how participants make sense of their social and personal world, or phenomenon under study. In a study by Rae et al. (2023), the researchers examined the perspectives of youth with autism spectrum disorder during their adulthood transitions. The use of photovoice and narratives were instrumental in capturing the essence of the transition from being a child to becoming an adult. Photovoice served as an effective method to make meaning that words cannot encapsulate. In another study by Tumkaya et al. (2021), the researchers adopted an innovative technique by using an online Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (OIPA) framework to their online photovoice (OPV) to gather and analyze data. The aim of their study was to investigate the problems young college students experienced with support resources online or distance education during the COVID 19 pandemic. The ability to conduct this research online was convenient for the participants, but challenges such as internet and technology availability was a barrier in recruitment. Their findings suggest that using photovoice with young people is advantageous to understand the factors that facilitate and complicate online learning.

Another IPA study by Sadler (2016) used photovoice to explore the experiences of illness and survival with adults who had experienced childhood cancer. This topic and use of photovoice was emotion evoking for the participants, and wielded profound data for the researcher. The photovoice method provided an avenue for the survivors to share their experiences through visual storytelling. IPA was applied for all verbal and visual data, which provided an opportunity to reflect on the feelings as an adult survivor of childhood cancer. The researchers were able to understand, through their photos and narratives, what it felt like for them to live with the illness and their fears of cancer and

relapse. On the same note, Pickin et al. (2011) conducted an IPA and photovoice study with foster parents. The research elicited an exploration of emotional experiences and provided practical solutions for their support (p. 71). Similarly, Plunkett et al. (2013), found promising results in their study with photovoice to understand lived experiences; however, verifying rigour is necessary. Tomar and Stoffel (2014) conducted a study using photovoice to examine the lived experience of post-secondary education of two student veterans. This research resulted in the development of a set of occupation-based interventions to support veterans in their post-secondary pursuits. Combined visual and verbal data can provide a more abundant account of the meaning of equitable rural education (Pickin et al., 2011) regardless of the cognitive development of participants (Sutton-Brown, 2014). These studies establish that the combination of IPA and photovoice is appropriate for youth participants and the complicated topic of equity in education. In the next paragraphs, I will discuss the application of IPA and photovoice in my research study by explaining important theoretical foundations of this methodology.

In this study, I blend IPA with photovoice to orient participants to photograph experience in individual interviews and a group discussion by reflecting and sharing their experience to build on their understanding of equity and inequity in rural education. I then utilized IPA to make sense of the data, which I expanded on in the data collection and analysis sections.

The foundation and philosophical base of IPA and Participatory Action Research (PAR) differ substantially (Pickin et al., 2011; Tomar & Stoffel, 2014). Despite this, I have chosen to combine IPA and PAR to undertake this research for several overarching reasons. First, photovoice is an effective method to use with youth because it engages

them in the research process, and it allows for varying levels of language, education and ability in participants (Liebenberg, Ungar, & Theron, 2014; Tilley & Taylor, 2018). Second, unlike PAR, IPA is an inductive research process; which in this case is necessary to understand the deep and detailed meaning of equitable rural education in a northern rural context. Third, I engaged in critical consciousness throughout the research process, and participatory methods are necessary for the outcomes of this research to coincide with critical reflection and critical social action against inequities, which the IPA framework permits. Neither IPA, nor PAR alone would address the research problem posed by this study.

IPA alone does not achieve the purpose of this study because I am seeking youths' in-depth understanding and meaning of educational equity in northern rural settings (double hermeneutics) in a geographically isolated community as well as providing a forum for subsequent collective action, this is where PAR comes in. The combination of IPA and participatory methods fosters collaboration with participants for collective action after their insight on equitable rural education has been illustrated via photovoice. The outcomes of social action are possible with participatory methods because of its foundational concepts. PAR is defined as a social action process that facilitates research activities, education and action (Agbo, 2003; Hall, 1981). PAR with youth in rural settings is an efficient research method used in qualitative studies (Agbo, 2003/2006) because of its depth of thinking and subsequent action (Wilson et al., 2007). IPA fulfilled those two research objectives superbly. In essence, the purpose of my research sparked the need for a research design that could process a deep understanding of an emotionally

laden topic like equity in rural education and provide the parameters for social action, which I discuss in the next section.

The primary method employed in this study was photovoice, which proved to be an effective means for participants to express their perspectives and experiences in a visually compelling and profound manner (Plunkett et al., 2013). Drawing guidance from Wang and Burris (1997), the goals of photovoice were implemented, enabling participants to document and reflect upon both the strengths and concerns of their respective schools. The process commenced during the photovoice orientation, where I introduced the purpose of study and key concepts to the participants.

The photovoice introduction was completed virtually using Microsoft Teams during class times. The participants were together at a table in the special education room, and the presentation was brought up on the main projector. This setting was chosen by the participants and agreed upon by their teachers. The photovoice orientation was much like an education session for the participants. I explained the purpose, goals, and methods at length. I provided basic information on the research question, ethical guidelines, and process of photovoice. In addition, I highlighted how their photos would help encourage reflection on the phenomenon that we are studying, which transformed into creating a collective critical action. In this study, photovoice provided a unique platform for underrepresented and underserved individuals (Wang & Burris, 1994) such as rural populations (Schueller et al., 2019) to highlight the strengths and weaknesses of their school and community by first critically reflecting on the issues, and then critically acting on them via photo taking (Plunkett et al., 2013).

Instrumentation. Participants used their personal smartphones for this research. I made the decision to use the youth's personal cellular devices over a digital camera because of familiarity and cost effectiveness. Further, participants were more likely to have their phones with them rather than a camera, making it more likely they would capture their experiences in real time. Participants took photographs using their camera icon, stored them on their phones, and then uploaded them to Google Drive where they could add written narratives. I reimbursed the participants' data usage by providing them with a gift card for their respective mobility provider. The participants knew that sharing their photos was optional and they maintained control of what images they wanted to include in the research data. I do not know if participants shared every single photo they took because they were not required to document every photo they captured. However, each participant shared at least four photos. In addition, I made the participants aware that they had the right to remove any of their photos at any point during the research by checking in with them with each photo they presented.

***Photography Education*.** According to Latz (2017), professional photographers can be utilized as part of the photography training for photovoice research. As such, I hired Carly at Life as She Knows It Photography. Carly assisted in teaching the basics of photography and the art behind taking a great photo. I provided education on photography and the main themes of the research to foster confidence in their technical abilities and engage them in critical consciousness raising. I discussed three salient themes in the literature that contributed to several inequities in northern and rural schools: urban-normativity, centralization and standardization, and spatial marginality. I defined words such as equity, inequity, and quality education by using the principles

from the Ontario Ministry of Education's (2009) *Equity and Inclusivity Education Strategy* and *Realizing the Promise of Diversity: Ontario's Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy*. Furthermore, I shared examples of previous photovoice projects to give them points of reference for what photovoice photos might look like.

I provided some guidance akin to photo etiquette to uphold key ethical considerations. Participants were discouraged from taking identifiable photos of people without their written consent. I made the participants aware that they were the owners of all photos and documents they created; therefore, they were in full control of their property. Further, I directed the participants not to take photos of illegal events or crimes, and to refrain from taking photos of other people's private property.

I provided the participants with prompts to help guide their photo taking. They were given a list of questions and words were to reflect on during the process. They were asked to capture 25-30 photos highlighting the impact of the following themes on their experience of being educated in a northern rural school. I developed prompts using the literature on northern, rural schools. Prompts for photo taking were:

- This is my northern, rural schooling story
- This is where I belong
- This is my school at its best
- This is something I would like to change
- This is something I would like to see change in the future
- What are my roadblocks in school?
- What motivates me in school?

Narration

Part of photo elicitation is to add a voice to the photos (Wang & Burris, 1997). Narration took place alone, during their individual interviews and/or during the focus group. Participants wrote their own captions and meanings to photos they wanted to share. Participants shared their favourite photos and discussed them in the focus group. Participants engaged in critical reflection, while they narrated their photos using the SHOWeD strategy (Wang, 1999). The SHOWeD strategy asks the following:

- What do you see here?
- What is happening here?
- How does this relate to our lives?
- Why does this problem or strength exist?
- How could this image educate the community (school) or policymakers?
- What can we do about it?

Semi-Structured Individual Interviews

In an attempt to uncover the phenomenon through their words, I conducted semi-structured interviews to solicit the participants' understandings of what equitable rural education means to them (Smith et al., 2009). Semi-structured interviews (SSI) are a valid instrument to gain insight into a topic by allowing some structure and some free reign on the conversation (Fontana & Frey, 2008). I conducted SSIs using an interview questionnaire (Appendix B) with scheduled primary, sub questions and probes (McIntosh & Morse, 2015). I followed Seidman's (2013) interview guide for the individual interviews. For the individual interviews, I virtually met with each participant and completed the interview using Microsoft Teams. I organized the interviews with the

participants during their free time at school. Teachers were made aware that the interviews were taking place, with the consent of the participant. A single one-on-one 90-minute virtual interview occurred with each participant after the completion of his or her photo elicitation. For each interview, I included the following:

1) Their life history as it pertains to equitable rural education (for example, tell me about yourself and what rural education means to you?);
2) Asked for details on their current lived experience (how are you experiencing, or not experiencing equitable rural education?);
3) Encouraged thorough reflection on what equitable education means to them (what does that mean to you?).

Questions were open-ended and formulated to elicit conversation about their experiences and photos. All of the questions were asked systematically to all participants in the same way, but were semi-structured enough that divergence from the script was permitted (McIntosh & Morse, 2015). Afterwards, they participated in a 135-minute focus group to discuss their findings with one another, determine social action projects, and develop strategies for action planning.

Focus Group

The focus group session was the final data collection process, and I conducted them in-person at the high school. Focus groups provide a social process for meaning making through interaction between participants (Kreuger, 1988). They also create space to deepen participant reflection on their lived experience (Kreuger, 1988). The participants wanted to meet me in person, so I traveled to the school and met with them and the teaching staff. All participants were present and the discussion was audio-

recorded for transcription. The participants sat at a big square table with their photos loaded on the screens of their laptops. I started the discussion process with rapport-building questions because although I met the participants virtually, I was re-meeting them in person. Shortly thereafter, questions and dialogue flowed well, and I structured the focus group discussion based on the participant photographs (Wang, 1999). I asked prompting questions to begin the conversation about the experience of photovoice. Participants provided their meaning and narration for each of their photos. I asked them to discuss the most meaningful and surprising photos; whether they discovered something that they did not know before the study; what they enjoyed the most; what they disliked the most; and any other discoveries they had. While actively listening, I engaged in the identification of themes within the participants' photographs, simultaneously ensuring that I accurately understood their reflections by paraphrasing their words and confirming these themes with them.

The group initiated a discussion on potential themes, titles, and descriptive paragraphs to encapsulate the essence of their respective photos. As the focus group progressed, they categorized and rearranged specific photos into different clusters. During the sharing session, the focus group collectively constructed a comprehensive understanding of the diverse experiences pertaining to equitable rural education. Connecting the themes from the literature, while upholding the principles of critical analysis on where power is situated, educational ideology is developed, and knowledge is generated, I asked them to ponder the following topics:

- Urban-normativity- how the urban centres are privileged and are dominant
- Spatial marginality

- Standardization and centralization
- Other inequities that are barriers to a quality education
- Strengths/qualities or your northern rural school/community
- How they overcome their struggles

Towards the conclusion of the focus group, the discussion seamlessly shifted (without my intervention) towards contemplating how their participation in the research could be utilized to effect tangible change. It is important to note that the social action phase was not included in the data collection process as the participants opted to retain their photovoice images to pursue individual initiatives due to the challenges imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic. The participants initiated a conversation about organizing a photo exhibition; however, a consensus on the preferred medium for showcasing their photovoice was not reached.

Field Notes

Throughout the interviews and focus group, I diligently recorded field notes to serve as an observational tool, aiding in the subsequent analysis (Saldana, 2016). These notes encompassed a summary of significant points, observations of emotional, facial, linguistic, and physical reactions, as well as personal reflections (Saldana, 2016). The quantity of notes varied across participants, influenced by the dynamics and depth of our interactions. This comprehensive record of observations proved invaluable in safeguarding against the influence of my pre-existing knowledge on the topic.

Time Frame

The data collection phase started in February 2022 and concluded in late May 2022. Table 3 presents a timeline of the data collection activities.

Table 3

Timeline of Data Collection

Topic/Session	Content	Comments
Participant recruitment 28/02/2022 – 18/03/2022	Poster distribution, teacher and principal recommendations, attended school staff meeting, and morning announcements	Five youth expressed interest and consented to participate
Photovoice Orientation 08/04/2022 & 10/04/2022	Group orientation and photovoice training	Affected by pandemic Restrictions- introduced research purpose, equity and photography

Photo Taking 10/04/2022-03/05/2022	Participant photo taking, phone/texts to encourage process	Two week time period provided
Individual interviews 20/04/2022-03/05/2022	Interviews using Microsoft Teams	Affected by pandemic restrictions
Selection of photos and narration 28/04/2022-03/05/2022	Individual meetings using	Microsoft Teams to choose and narrate photos
Photovoice session 05/05/2022	Virtual focus group to discuss photos	Microsoft Teams to choose and narrate photos
Focus group 06/05/2022	In-person group discussion of reflections and themes	At *Selected School*

Data collection took longer than anticipated due to one participant being ill and not being able to attend school due to COVID 19 pandemic restrictions resulting in their absence during the initial photovoice orientation. Therefore, I provided a repeat photovoice orientation attended by all participants. Data collection was further delayed

due to a technological barrier; one participant who needed to use the school's computer for the virtual individual interview, because the participant did not have a home computer, missed the school bus the day of the scheduled meeting and had to be rescheduled at a later date.

Data Analysis

According to Agbo (2003), there is not "one best way" to analyze data in participatory research (p. 37). Further, Glesne (2007) describes the process of analyzing data in qualitative studies as "rarely formulaic, relying instead on the researcher's abilities to perceive and describe obvious patterns and themes, as well as subtleties, perplexities, contradictions, and nuances in the data" (as cited in Barrett, 2007, p. 420). Creswell and Miller (2010) argue that the interpretation of the data in qualitative work is endlessly creative. Therefore, I organized the data as a sequence of events that required me to "interpolate and extrapolate, make judgments and assume, doubt, and affirm [the data]" (Peshkin, 2000, p. 5). I trusted my own logical thinking to weave cogent commentary, reflections, and references to the literature with illustrative data excerpts (Barrett, 2007, p. 428). As I used photovoice, interview and focus group methods, the analysis of data started as the collection of data began. Smith et al. (2009) recommend reading and re-reading the transcripts as the first step of data analysis. Immediately after the interview, I listened to the audio-recorded interviews and read the Otter.ai transcribed documents. This process allowed me to reflect on the interview, make corrections to the transcribed document, and carefully read and re-read every sentence.

I analyzed all individual interviews, field notes, photovoice and focus groups following the guidance offered by Smith et al. (2009). In order to facilitate data analysis,

I employed audio recording to capture all verbal data for subsequent transcription. I then proceeded to identify prevalent themes and clusters within the transcripts that encapsulated the essence of equitable rural education. Concurrently, the youth participants undertook a similar process for their photovoice contributions during the focus group sessions. As the researcher, I highlighted concepts in the participants' stories, clustered their topics together as I read and re-read their transcripts, and listened to the audio. I used the data analysis spiral (Creswell, 2014; Smith et al., 2009) to organize and then peruse the data to get an initial interpretation. When all transcripts were accurate, I uploaded them in NVivo 10 and began coding. I coded each transcript independently with NVivo by uploading the transcripts and creating a thematic code list for each participant. I created a common list of codes and cluster codes from all participants to begin the cross analysis. The iterative process of analysis resulted in a series of cluster codes that I revealed in the data. I used NVivo10 for the initial coding and organizing of data, but I did not use NVivo10 to assist in defining final themes. Instead, I printed initial codes from NVivo10 and sorted sub-themes and themes, engaging in an iterative process until the final themes were discovered. This iterative process is cyclical in nature thereby circling around the multiple parts of data (Laverty, 2003).

Initial Descriptive Notetaking

I coded each transcript independently with NVivo and created a thematic code list for each participant. I created a common list of codes and cluster codes from all participants to begin the cross analysis. I then printed these codes and focused on the commonalities, the patterns, and contradictions. I wrote descriptive comments, linguistic/key words, conceptual statements, emergent themes, and subordinate themes.

These included significant topics that required further thought (experiences, concepts, etc.). Table 4 outlines an example of the initial descriptive note taking and development of themes for Butterfly.

Descriptive	Key Words	Conceptual Comments	Emergent Themes
At ease	She is comfortable at school	Feels connected with the school and learning	Connection and belonging Attachment
Close	She is close to her teachers and peers	She has relationships at school Friendships and relationships developed	
Kindness	Teachers are understanding and kind to her They are like friends but smarter	She is understood and this helps her feel like she matters	Importance and empathy

Easy	Learning is easy for her	Implies a lack of struggle in learning	Smart and intelligent
	I can do well in school even if I have friends	Self awareness of her strengths	Conducive environment
Time wasted	She is frustrated with too much time on the bus	Frustrated with the travel process	Deterrent to get to school
	She is annoyed and angry at how many times the bus is cancelled	Annoyed that she misses school when bus is cancelled	Arduous process No alternative plans to provide education
Effort	“I don’t think others understand how much effort it takes for us to	Frustrated by the lack of consideration	Travel is hard, and yet they do their best to get there

	get on the bus, to school, and home”	Want to be acknowledged for their effort		
Annoyed	“It's annoying, I just stay home when there are no buses. I miss school and get behind. The lessons don’t stop because I'm not there”	She feels like her education isn’t taken seriously Who is to blame?	My education doesn’t really matter to others	
Hope	“I just go to school and hope for the best”	School is routine and positive mindset	School is safe	
Growth	Having a life outside the books helped me connect with myself and learn that I didn’t want to be a doctor, but a baker	Letting go of what she thought she wanted, and exploring other options	Discovery of self	
Depressing		Boredom	Lack of socializing	

	Not having anything to do, leads to staying inside, staying in leads to isolation		
Boredom	Not having anything to do We find our own 'fun' Always on our phones for entertainment	Frustrated that it leads to addiction to drugs, alcohol or technology	Denial of organized socialization
Come to us	"Instead of making us travel to you, come to us"	Changing how the system works	Challenging the status quo
Opportunity	"We need more learning opportunities outside the regular stuff" "We have so many opportunities to do stuff that we couldn't in bigger school"		Learning needs are not met

	"We have the opportunity to get to know our teachers because the classes are so small"		Proximity leads to more relationship

Table 4. Initial Descriptive Note-Taking and Emergent Themes for Participant Butterfly

In Table 4, I demonstrate an example of initial descriptive note-taking and emergent themes from participant Butterfly. The descriptive category is a descriptor of the key words from the verbatim of participant Butterfly. The conceptual comments category aimed at understanding what Butterfly was trying to get at. The emergent theme is the overall meaning behind her statements. I completed the IPA process with added descriptors, keywords from verbatim, conceptual comments and emergent themes for all recorded data.

In Table 5 is a snippet of the cross-case analysis that I completed for each question asked.

Interview question	Astro	Butterfly	Jay	Table	Cookie
High school experiences	I come to school to graduate	Balanced school	Boredom Lots of laugh	Some bullying	Good experiences

		Care about our mental health	All learning is marked	Good friendships Its chill	Supportive teachers Good friends
Fair education	Reassess every semester	Be able to go to school everyday More opportunities like other big schools	Access to school Inconsistent bus	More opportunities to do arts and crafts Food security-no cafeteria	Inconsistent bus Gives us what we need to succeed
Curriculum	Teachers do their best to include different things as marks	Wish they had more art opportunities	Wish I could go on the land more and make it count	Incorporate more learning	Get rid of streaming
Value	Friends and teachers patience	Friends Safe	My friends are important	Non judgmental teachers	Being able to be myself

Change	Better online education with more equipment More opportunities to eat at school	Come to us Health specialist come to us so I don't miss so much school	Travel Good bussing company More youth led committees	Better internet More teachers and help Renovations	Community come together for bussing
Opportunities	Access to teachers Some sports	More opportunities in creating things	Student trustee Close to teachers	Awesome teachers Dual relationship	Small school means solid relationship s to teachers
Community	Lack of road care	We walk and walk because that's all there is to do	Boredom leads to drugs and alcohol	Needs more things for the youth to flourish	There's nothing here

In Table 5, I demonstrated cross-case analyzed transcripts for all five participants in this study and placed them in rows according to questions.

Emergent Themes and Subordinate Themes

As you move through the analysis, the interpretive phenomenology begins to occur (Smith et al., 2009). The themes that emerged in this study reflected both the participants' original words and my interpretation of them (Smith et al., 2009). I classified and synthesized the data by group themes (Creswell, 2014). Following with the thematic analysis mentioned above, I read and re-read data and took notes to get as close to the data as possible (Noon, 2018); I marked emerging themes from the notes taken from the first step; I looked for connections in emergent themes; and I produced a table of items creating subordinate themes. I used post it cards to identify emergent themes, then I clustered the emergent themes together, revealing subordinate themes.

The Voice to the Photos

Participants discussed their photos in the focus group and added verbal meaning to their visual representations. Participants narrated their photos using the SHOWeD strategy discussed above (Wang, 1999). In the process of conducting IPA on the participant photovoice, I followed Smith et al.'s (2009) guidelines. Although there is no specific format to conduct IPA on photovoice, I adapted the 5-step approach, being mindful to incorporate critical consciousness theory. The process is as follows: one, I interpreted the pictures individually one by one, consistent with Smith et al. 's (2013) reading and re-reading stage; two, I made exploratory comments on each photo beginning to elucidate possible emergent themes as per another possible layer of meaning. I conducted a thorough review of the images, diligently seeking to decipher their intended

meanings, while simultaneously analyzing patterns and discrepancies that may arise between my own observations as a researcher and the narratives and notes provided by the participants; three, emergent themes began to surface out of the data. I reviewed and rechecked these emergent themes many times for authentication; four, photo by photo required the work of analyzing each photo in the order that the participant took them. Using a layered approach, each photo was extensively interpreted; and finally, following the interpretation of each photo, I engaged in a comparative analysis by meticulously examining the entire photographic collection. This process involved developing categories that captured various layers of meaning and actively investigating patterns and connections that emerged across different cases.

In order to establish a comprehensive understanding, I integrated the IPA of both the photovoice and audio data, resulting in a consolidated compilation of emergent themes, which later served as the basis for a final list of subordinate themes. To ensure the reliability and accuracy of the findings, I adhered to Smith et al.'s (2009) recommendation of employing multiple data sources and employing triangulation. This involved promptly analyzing the data, identifying any extreme cases or outliers (Creswell, 2014), and remaining attentive to contradictory evidence. By incorporating both visual and spoken data, the process of triangulation was facilitated, enhancing the robustness of the analysis.

Rigor and Trustworthiness

The epistemological underpinnings of qualitative methodology assume multiple truths (Guba & Lincoln, 1994), and therefore rigor substantiates its findings in research (Plunkett et al., 2013). As I combined photovoice method and IPA methodology in this

study, which stem from differing research traditions, namely critical and interpretive paradigms, I ensured the validity of this research by establishing trustworthiness (Plunkett et al., 2013).

Reflexivity is an essential part of this study. According to Pillow (2003), an "engaged qualitative researcher is someone who puts the reflexive process" at the forefront (p. 188). As such, I ensured the rigor of this study in two ways: one, I kept a journal to pen my affective and cognitive reactions throughout the entire data collection and analysis and two, I adhered to the epoch process. The epoch process requires the researcher to park preconceptions of the phenomenon to engage in the analysis (Patton, 1980). I did so by being self-aware of my reactions, consulting with my colleagues, supervisor, and committee, and regularly engaged in reflexive journaling. Although IPA creates room for subjectivity (Smith, 2011), I was reflexive in my analysis process by consciously acknowledging my preconceived notions (Tilley, 2016). As a social worker who practices psychotherapy and mindfulness, I am committed to the practice of being self-aware of my reactions and actions. For example, one of the preconceptions of this research is that there are several individual and systemic inequitable aspects to rural education because rural students receive a lower quality of education based on their geographic location. Another essential part of the reflexive practice is to bracket my preconceived ideas and notions of rurality during data analysis (Smith, 2011).

There are many ways that the researcher can ensure the quality and rigour of a study. Member checking for accurate interpretation is one of them. I was actively curious throughout the data collection and analysis phase by frequently checking with the participants for accuracy and appropriate understanding of narratives and abstractions

(Morse, 2015). I asked clarifying questions about their stories and the significance of the photographs during both the one-on-one interviews and focus groups (Plunkett et al., 2013). Furthermore, participants had the opportunity to review the transcripts from their individual interviews, and focus group data. I contributed to the trustworthiness in this study by adding my personal and cultural information and engaging in reflexivity and curiosity throughout the data collection process.

Ethical Considerations

This study was reviewed by the Lakehead Research Ethics Board, which approved of the research as meeting the requirements of conducting research with humans. Upon identifying potential participants, I provided them with physical and digital versions of informed consent. Participants provided their written expressed consent before the research process began. The use of written consent is necessary for research to take place and it is an ongoing process throughout the entire project for the benefit of the participants (Brooks-Gunn & Rotheram-Borus, 1994; Girling, 2016). The next step of the ongoing informed consent process was to orient the youth to the research, including the different data collection and analysis phases.

The first ethical consideration for this study was regarding the significant impact research can have on participants in a rural and remote community (Wilson-Forsebery & Easley, 2012). As a result, it is essential to be aware of the insider knowledge of the city, such as close bonds and rivalries. One way of mitigating or minimizing any negative impact is by making your presence known before any research is conducted (Wilson-Forsebery & Easley, 2012). As a previous resident of the community for 22 years, I am a

familiar face within the community. As such, I circulated a research flyer and connected with my peers through word of mouth to announce my presence.

The second consideration was regarding the culture and ethnicity of the participants. Although this research is not specific to Indigenous youth, there is a sizable Indigenous population in northern Ontario. I anticipated the potential of at least one Indigenous participant. Cognizant of this, this research followed the tri-council framework for research with Indigenous People. Furthermore, I acknowledged the significance of the land, its people, the colonial history it holds, and the enduring memories tied to its territories by ensuring that all five surrounding First Nations were made aware of this research. To solicit input for this study, I took proactive measures by reaching out to each community's Chief and Council through a formal letter, which was followed up with a personal phone call. Recognizing the historical vulnerability of Indigenous communities and their Peoples to exploitation by researchers (Tuhiwai Smith, 2012), I placed utmost importance on establishing respectful engagement with the surrounding Indigenous communities (Tilley, 2016).

Lastly, I considered the potential heightened risks of social and psychological harm for rural and racialized youth when identifying themselves or sharing their experiences (Ellard-Gray et al., 2015) by implementing precautionary measures to prioritize the participants' safety throughout the study. While I deemed the likelihood of harm as low, I remained prepared to effectively address and mitigate such situations by implementing the following strategies:

1) A consent form that outlined the potential risks of the study, confidentiality, limits to confidentiality, limited anonymity, policies on storing of data and use of data upon which the youth signed and agreed.
2) The youth know that they came first before the research.
3) Frequent check-ins occurred with youth to assess their comfort level by saying: How are things so far? Do you feel comfortable continuing? Would you like to continue? Stop here? And so forth.
4) I had detailed information on local and available no-cost mental health services to provide to all youth.
5) I took natural and regular breaks throughout the research processes to ensure the youth were comfortable.
6) I reminded them frequently of their right to omit parts of data or completely withdraw at any point in the research process.

Summary

The ultimate objective of my research, in seeking to understand equities and inequities of rural education through the northern, rural youths' lives and experiences, is to have a transformative impact by bringing together a robust methodology and critical consciousness theory to amplify the voices of the youth in their schools. In this chapter, I discussed the research design for the proposed research study. While IPA is the research methodology, photovoice, interviews and focus groups are the research methods that help answer the overarching questions. I conducted part of this research virtually due to COVID 19 pandemic restrictions, and *the selected school* has been supportive of this research. In the next chapter, I discuss the findings of my study.

Chapter Five: Findings

This chapter encompasses the key superordinate themes that emerged from the analysis, shedding light on various aspects of the participants' experiences. The first theme, "Contextual Obstacles to Learning," delves into the participants' struggles and barriers encountered within their northern, rural, and isolated school environment. The second theme, "Isolation Stunting Youth Development," explores the challenges stemming from geographic isolation and its impact on their ability to realize their full potential. The third theme, "School as a Place of Belonging," examines the strengths and advantages of their educational journey, emphasizing the significance of their school as a supportive and inclusive space fostering positive youth development. Finally, the theme titled "Importance of a Flexible Approach to Learning" elucidates how a flexible learning environment fosters equity in education. By engaging in critical reflection throughout the research process, I present the participants' ideas, strategies to build upon existing strengths, ways to address challenges, and methods to overcome barriers hindering equitable rural education. This section concludes by synthesizing the participants' themes, offering a comprehensive understanding of equitable rural education from the perspectives of northern, rural youth, and providing insights into their pivotal role in driving and sustaining transformational change. The overarching question that guided this study was precisely aimed at:

- How do northern, rural youth ages 15 to 18 years old experience educational equity in a geographically isolated high school?
- What are the spatial, educational, and socio-cultural obstacles encountered in northern, rural secondary education?

- How does schooling situated within a northern, rural, and remote context influence youth education development?

Theme One: Contextual Obstacles to Learning

The first theme in this research aimed to address a fundamental question: What are the spatial, educational, and socio-cultural obstacles encountered in rural education? It specifically focused on exploring the obstacles to learning that were distinctive to the participants' northern, rural context, which justifies the naming of this overarching theme. One significant aspect highlighted by the participants was the necessity for rural education to be accessible on a daily basis in order to ensure equity. In my second analysis, I delved deeper into the factors that hindered their regular attendance at school, leading to the emergence of a subordinate theme, namely "obstacles to (face-to-face) learning." All five participants acknowledged the presence of barriers that impeded their ability to attend school, giving rise to four subthemes: the northern climate, transportation challenges, travel for healthcare, and mental health compounded by grief. I provide a detailed discussion of each subtheme to illustrate its connection to the overarching theme of educational inequity. As classified by the participants, this theme significantly contributes to the understanding of the challenges faced in rural education.

Northern Climate

The first sub theme within the context of "Contextual Obstacles to Learning" focuses on the Northern climate, which emerged as a prominent topic during interviews, focus groups, and photovoice activities. The Northern climate had a significant impact on the participants' ability and willingness to attend school. According to the youth, they perceived the Northern climate as an uncontrollable barrier that hindered their learning experiences. In a casual conversation with a

teacher, it was mentioned that the catchment area of the *selected high school* experiences temperamental weather conditions. Located in a northern, sub-arctic climatic zone within the province, the area is prone to frequent winter storms. While the amount of snowfall varies, it is consistently substantial, ranging from 2 to 10 feet per year. To illustrate this, I share the first photo taken by Table, which depicts a snow accumulation of two feet. The participant explained that this photo serves as an example of the amount of snow the community receives.

Photo 1

The Snow

"We get a lot of snow here, and Winter is long. This last Winter was especially bad, and buses would get cancelled weekly and even more than that." (photovoice, Photo 1 by Table).

Table is in grade 10; she travels 35 km each way by bus on a daily basis to get to and from school. She is currently living with her parents, both of whom are alumni of *the selected school*. She is a student trustee for the school board. She does not play sports, but would like to. She does not have a part time job. When asked about the things that get in the way of getting to school on a daily basis, she spoke about how she feels like she is at the mercy of the weather:

> *Like we live in the north so we should be better prepared for bad weather so that we can safely get to school. It literally depends on the weather whether I get to school or not* (individual interview, Table).

Further, Table made the connection between missing school and her academic success:

> *At first, snow days or a cancelled bus are fun, but after a while it just sucks. I can only imagine if you wanted to be a doctor someday. Kinda hard to ace that exam when you miss so much school. Unless you're naturally smart* (individual interview, Table).

Cookie is another participant. She is in grade nine and travels 40 km by bus each way to get to and from school. She currently lives on a reservation and needs to get a ride to a bus stop in the town in order to get on the bus to the high school, as the bus does not go to her house at this time. It is her first year at the high school. Cookie suggested that bad weather is inevitable because of where they live. It's predictable in the winter months in northern Ontario to have major weather systems impact our daily living. She felt like the community could be more proactive in organizing something together to compensate for bus cancellations due to weather.

> *We have winter storms like all the time, we live in the north, if the highways aren't closed, the community should come together to get us to school anyways.* (Individual interview, Cookie)

Weather events that are typical of the northern climate also played a role in the participants' ability to do things outside of school, such as after school activities, outdoor activities, working a part time job, and hanging out with friends. This was shared by Jay. Jay is in grade 12 and travels 35 km each way to attend school. He moved from another province. When asked what got in the way of getting to school every day, he replied:

> *For me the weather really determines whether my friends and I hang out. Good weather makes it easy for my friends to chill. Bad weather, we don't chill.* (Individual interview, Jay)

Instead of hanging out with his friends because of snow and cold weather, Jay described what he did instead, which was playing video games or go on social media:

> *I should stay inside, play video games, or go on my phone. It's boring. Winter is too cold to go out so people just stay inside, play videogames or worse, get into trouble.* (Individual interview, Jay).

Jay mentioned that the inclement weather caused him to stay inside; staying inside led to boredom, and therefore, boredom contributed to some people getting into trouble. Furthermore, there were some participants who discussed how the northern climate influenced them to stay inside, which worsened their mood, and their mood influenced getting to school. Butterfly explained:

> *In the winter it's (their mental health) kinda worst. Everyone just stays inside. No one does much, it's kind of depressing. So I sleep instead of going to school.* (Individual interview, Butterfly).

> *Sometimes I just stay home and miss school because it's too cold out there. The cold makes me anxious. It's not like I jumped in the car and go, I have to walk to the bus stop in the freezing weather, wait, and sometimes it didn't even show up. So I'll stay home and miss school.* (Individual interview, Astro)

In the focus group, I raised the issue of *fairness* and *weather* by asking them: Is it fair to miss school because of weather? This question prompted a discussion on fairness as it related to how the weather affected their ability to get to and from school every day. The following conversation is the dialogue that took place in the focus group, which expanded the role of weather as it relates to fairness:

> *No it's not (fair). Kids in big cities have other ways to get to school if buses are cancelled, like taxis or city buses, not here. Walk if you can or stay home. I don't think that's right or fair to us.* (Butterfly, focus group)

> *I don't think it's fair that we have to miss school because there is a snow storm, but it might be safe, so is it fair? I think students should have the opportunity to go to school every day. Snowstorms happen all the time, I get it, they care about our safety, but the highways aren't closed so.* (Butterfly, focus group)

> *[…] it impacts a lot of people's education because the way our areas are set up, the school isn't going to be closed when you have a snow day. Because we have students that live in the town that the school is in and they can walk or they can get a ride. Right. So, the school doesn't get close to local kids. So those kids are at an advantage, no? Is that fair?* (Cookie, focus group)

> *Well, I miss a lot of school because of it, like this winter was bad. The bus was cancelled at least once a week. That's excessive because my friend's mom gets to work and drives*

> *to and from (community) to (community). So I miss school because I can't walk or take the bus to school on bad weather days, so I get behind and I didn't even want to be.* (Table, focus group)

During the conversation, we further discussed the advantage enjoyed by students residing in the community where the selected high school is located. However, in an individual interview with Astro, who happens to live in that community, he revealed that teachers do not strictly follow the curriculum on snow days. Astro explained that on days with inclement weather, he often opts to stay home as the school tends to be quiet or even deserted, given that a significant portion of the students rely on buses for transportation.

> *When the buses are cancelled, school is so dead because like a lot of students come from other communities, so when there's bad weather, I stay home because I know there won't be much to do at school. I just do my own thing, catch up or whatever.* (individual interview, Astro)

As I explored further into what "dead" meant and how that related to his education, Astro described his experience as:

> *Like, um, quiet and usually there isn't that much to do. Like there is, but its not a regular lesson or whatever… I guess I miss out on school. Get behind. I don't know* (individual interview, Astro)

The northern climate was not only perceived as a barrier but also appreciated for its positive aspects, as exemplified by the following photos showcasing its beauty. Jay, for instance, described photo 2, which captures the view from his backyard deck overlooking Longlac Lake.

Photo 2

The Landscape

 :

> *I decided to take this photo because it's beautiful. A picture of the lake in my backyard. There are pockets of beauty here in the north, world-class fishing in this lake. But most importantly, living here is boring so you have to find a hobby that involves nature. Otherwise, four years of high school until you move away to college will be long* (photo 2, photovoice by Jay).

Participant Table, too, highlighted the advantages of living in the northern climate, as evidenced by their sharing of photo 3. They described the image as being taken while riding on a sled attached to a snowmobile, with their uncle at the helm. The photo was captured by their sibling. Despite the challenges the northern climate posed to their education, Table and Jay recognized it as a source of enjoyment and leisure, which they both embraced.

Photo 3

Snowed-in

> *I get to ride my snowmobiles and ATVs around here like cars. But they are leisurely. There aren't as many stores here in the small town, or activities like bowling, swimming pools, or movies, but there's lots of great fishing, hunting and snowmobiling, which allows me to enjoy living here*. (Photo 3; photovoice by Table)

In addition to students who depended on school buses for attending school, Astro's remarks about curriculum adjustments due to low student attendance on such days suggested that local students were also affected. Moreover, participants brought attention to the fact that bus cancellations were not solely attributed to inclement weather. Consequently, the subtheme of "Taking the Bus" emerged from the collected data.

Taking the Bus

The second subtheme in the Contextual Obstacles to Learning is "Taking the Bus." Four out of the five participants experience the reality of traveling by bus to reach school. It is paradoxical that taking the bus, while facilitating their attendance, is also considered an obstacle to learning. Photo 4 vividly captures this paradox, as the participants expressed their dislike for the hour-long journey every day, while recognizing that this highway is the route to their education. They also emphasized that even when the bus operates during inclement weather, the weather conditions can significantly extend their travel time.

Photo 4

The Highway

The highway that gets us to school everyday. I see this everyday for an hour. 30 minutes there and 30 minutes back, thats if the weather is good. As much as I hate riding it everyday, it is the road to my education. And without it, I wouldn't get to school.

Photo 4; photovoice by Butterfly

During my reflection on the analysis of codes, I observed that taking the bus not only presented challenges but also had therapeutic qualities and provided opportunities for social connections.

.

> *I zone out and listen to my tunes on the bus; it's relaxing for me once I get on the bus* (individual interview, Astro).

> *I don't know I feel like I am lucky though because I see my friends on the bus every day and that's when we catch up.* (individual interview, Butterfly).

The participants recognized the busing system as a hindrance to consistent access to education, as they often experienced the frustration of waiting at their bus stop only to discover through their friends that the buses had been cancelled.

> *The problem is that the bussing company changed recently, and that has caused so many headaches for everyone including the schools. But if the buses are cancelled we should find out before we leave the house, cause it sucks to freeze in the cold.* (Individual interview, Jay).

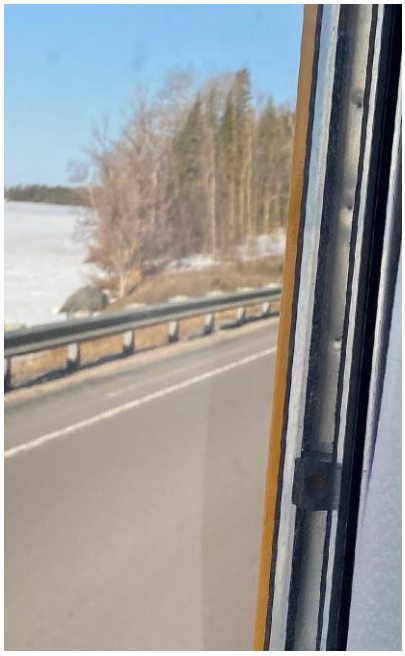
> *I wake up and the bus ride is between 30-45 minutes. That is if it even shows up.* (individual interview, Table)

> *It depends if there are drivers or not…I guess maybe we need a better bus company. People are much more unreliable [with this bus company], because this contract of bus company was a little bit of a cheaper than our old one.* (Individual interview, Table)

One of the photovoice contributions by Butterfly, photo 5, sheds light on the challenges related to the busing system. In this photo, Butterfly captures the view she encounters regularly while riding the bus. The image showcases a frozen lake and clear highways, and Butterfly specifically mentions the freezing temperatures in her description of the photo. Additionally, Butterfly provides a detailed explanation of the meaning behind photo 5, located below the image.

Photo 5

Frozen and sunny



"I take the bus every single day to go to school. But sometimes, especially in the winter months, the bus never comes. So my education gets interrupted." (Photo 5; photovoice by Butterfly)

Participants also raised concerns about the proximity to the school as a factor affecting reliable bus service. While some students lived a considerable distance away from the selected high school, others were just a five-minute walk away. According to Jay, this difference in residential location resulted in inequities regarding consistent access to school. While some students relied on the bus, others had the privilege of walking to school. Jay emphasized the discrepancy in experiences for students based on their place of residence.

> *The further town you live in, the less reliable the bus is. So, missing once a week because of weather, and another once a week for bus shortage is not bad when other communities sometimes miss days a time because there are no drivers.* (Individual interview, Jay)

Cookie, who was residing on the reservation during the research, also expressed the notion that the distance of one's residence played a significant role in school attendance due to transportation reliability issues.

> *Like for me if my ride doesn't come at the perfect time, I'll miss the main bus to school. It's one thing to have to drive to another town for school, but on top of that, I have to take a bus to a bus stop for another bus. It's not like I can take a city bus if I miss my bus. So I just stayed home.* (Individual interview, Cookie)

In these communities, there is no existing public transportation system. While I found out that taxis are available, they operate on limited schedules and not every day. Additionally, taxis are costly, and as Cookie mentioned, schools no longer cover the expenses. During the interview, I inquired about Cookie's experience of taking multiple buses to reach school and sought clarification on why the bus does not pick them up directly from their home. In response to my query, Cookie shared the following explanation:

> *We are in between homes. I don't have a permanent home right now, so I live on the reserve with family members. It's complicated but they won't get a bus to come get me on the reserve [at a temporary address] to bring me to my usual bus stop. So if I don't get a ride in the townsite, I can't get on the bus.* (Individual interview, Cookie)
>
> *It angers me and makes me sad because I deserve to be able to get to school. It's hard sometimes.* (Individual interview, Cookie)

Due to not having a permanent address, Cookie faced the challenge of the bus not being able to pick her up from her temporary residence. This situation greatly complicated matters for Cookie, ultimately becoming a significant barrier to her attendance and, consequently, her learning. The inability of the bus system to accommodate her temporary address was a systemic issue, leading Cookie to feel sadness and question her own worthiness.

Continuing with the subtheme of taking the bus, all participants except one relied on this mode of transportation to reach school. The lone exception had the privilege of walking to

school, while the other four had to endure round trips of over 40 kilometers along the Trans-Canada Highway. In a conversation with the principal, it was revealed that certain *selected high school* students embark on daily journeys spanning a staggering 75 kilometers each way. Nonetheless, the majority of students face commutes ranging from 30 to 40 kilometers. The duration of time spent on the buses varies among the participants. During their individual interviews, three participants expressed negative or calming experiences associated with bus travel. Some regarded it as a futile waste of time, while others deemed it an unavoidable necessity.

> *I don't get home till like 330 so it's a lot of time wasted. I don't work, but my friends work. So when they get off they have to run home like literally running home from the first bus stop because if they get off there's not enough time to get to work at four."* (individual interview, Butterfly)

> *Like taking a bus in the morning an hour to come to school to go home so that's a good percentage of our time wasted travelling."* (individual interview, Table)

> *I can't get a part-time job after school because of how much time I spend on the bus."* (individual interview, Jay).

As part of this research, one of my objectives was to gain insight into how young individuals perceive and navigate the obstacles hindering their education. I was particularly interested in exploring the potential solutions proposed by the participant-youth to address the impact of these barriers on their educational journey. During the data analysis process, as the superordinate themes emerged, I carefully coded the solutions articulated by the youth. Several participants offered ideas aimed at addressing the challenges associated with busing. For instance, Table acknowledged that transportation issues contributed to irregular attendance, which, in turn, disrupted the learning process. However, as a student trustee, Table viewed their role as an

opportunity to effect change and proposed the establishment of a committee to collaborate on improving the existing bussing system. Table elaborated on this idea, stating:

> *Well not everyone has parents that can drive them to Geraldton to go to school when the buses don't run, but maybe we could come together as a town and organize rides together…Maybe like a committee. We could find out who all drive to Geraldton from their home community and set up a Facebook group.* (Individual Interview, Table)

When I asked how this could develop, Table answered:

> *Yea, like now that I am a student trustee, I could bring it up as an issue at the board meetings, and go through the proper channels, there might even be pockets of money for that* (individual interview, Table).

Most participants relied on taking the bus as their means of transportation to school. However, the impact of busing differed among the participants, yet it consistently affected their motivation and ability to attend school. In the subsequent subtheme, I delve into the considerable obstacle of traveling for health care purposes and its implications for their educational journey.

Travel for Health Care

The third subtheme within Contextual Obstacles to Learning is *travel for health care*. In this community, there is dental and primary health care. However, Cookie and Butterfly stated that any orthodontic work, or specialist appointments, for example, require people to travel away from their homes to get the care. Cookie spoke about many barriers in being able to access health care because the Northern travel grants that they receive are not monies provided up front, and rather, people have to pay their way and then submit the grant for reimbursements. She felt lucky that her reservation band provided support, so this barrier was not one for health care, but she did talk to me about this at length in her individual interview as a barrier for others. Nonetheless, travel for health care in this context referred to a barrier to learning, and not a barrier to accessing health care. Two participants (Cookie and Butterfly) had several medical appointments out of town, as close as Thunder Bay (320 kilometres) and as far as Toronto (1275 kilometres).

This subtheme arose because of the frequency these two participants needed to travel to access health care, which resulted in school absenteeism. Cookie felt like she was used to travelling for regular dental care "*because it has always been like this*" (individual interview, Cookie). Further, she added,

> *I don't really care, I'm used to it [traveling for health care]. Because, you know, we drive or fly for hospitals and dental stuff. It's normal for us. Right. So we have to travel three, three and a half hours even if we are there only for like 20 minutes and you have to drive all the way back.* (individual interview, Cookie)

Sometimes she had to travel with her family if they had appointments out of town, which further affected her absences:

> *So I miss a lot of school for a 10-minute appointment. Plus, when my sibling needs to go up to see their doctor, I go up too right, so I miss school because of that too*. (Individual interview, Cookie)

I was intrigued by how one participant seemed nonchalant about travel for health care, while the other felt very passionate about the failure of the existing framework to support northerner's health care needs:

> *Its so annoying having to travel all the time for appointments, like, instead of making us travel 14 hours or 15 hours sometimes people even go 20 hours or maybe more just to go to a medical appointment that they need to do to. Why can't they come to us? I have health issues so I have to fly to Toronto many, many times a year for a 5 minute appointment with a specialist. Like it's expensive too. I can see why people don't go to their appointments because travel isn't cheap. Plus I miss so much school too because there isn't an airport here so I drive to Thunder Bay to fly out to Toronto* (individual interview, Butterfly).

Students living in remote areas often face the necessity of undertaking long-distance travel for healthcare services that are unavailable in their home communities. This leads to school absences that urban students do not encounter, resulting in inequitable access to healthcare and subsequently impacting their ability to access an equitable education. Butterfly, through photo 6 and 7, illustrates this issue by capturing the reality of missing multiple days of school for a single

one-hour health appointment. In photo 6, taken during her trip to Toronto, Butterfly reflects on the photos she should take for the research while acknowledging the school absence incurred due to the travel. Another image, photo 7, depicts a red bag on the bus, symbolizing the frustration she feels about the frequency of non-school-related travel and its interference with her education.

Photo 6

The Airplane

travel for basic health care

I have to travel on an airplane to get appropriate healthcare. It takes quite a bit of effort to get to the city. I have to go there several times a year, and every time I go for an hour appointment, I miss several days of school. I have good teachers that help me catch up, but to miss many school days for a quick appointment can be unfair. This needs to change...specialists should come to us, especially where we are so young and school is so important. What do the specialists have to lose if they come to us?

Photo 7

The Red Bag in the Bus

> *After we met for the photovoice training, I was riding the bus for some college stuff, and thought to myself this view is so familiar.. I travel for school, health care…why don't we have specialized health care here? It would be so much easier if I didn't have to go far away for my health.* (Photos 6 & 7; photovoice by Butterfly)

During individual interviews, I inquired about the participants' feelings regarding the multiple obstacles they faced in commuting to and from school, and their responses varied. The participants identified northern climate, taking the bus, and traveling for health care as external factors that impacted their school attendance. In contrast, the subsequent subtheme, mental health compounded by grief, was considered more of an internal factor influenced by external circumstances. However, before delving into the next subtheme, it is worth noting that the participants offered potential solutions to address this issue.

As part of this research, I coded the solutions that the participants brought forth. In this case, Butterfly's photo 7 highlighted how she misses school in order to attend health care appointments in urban centres; and suggested that if health care workers travel to communities instead of patients travelling to see them it would decrease the amount of school she misses. As she stated:

> *They have less to lose then we do.* (Individual interview, Table).

In the focus group, I made a point to bring this idea up. A discussion arose in the focus group about specialists for health and dental care coming to their community instead of the reverse. The following is the dialogue that took place in the focus group:

> *That would be fantastic as long as they have all the equipment they need to provide care. But, I doubt doctors would want to come here.* (Cookie, focus group)

> *I dont know how it would work, but it would be a lot cheaper for us and easier. I wouldn't have to miss school for 3-4 days a month.* (Butterfly, focus group)

> *I like that idea.* (Jay, focus group)

> *I think if we go to town council maybe, bring it there, do a survey, and go from there.* (Table, focus group)
>
> *I think if we use our photos maybe to show to the council, and start the conversation there.* (Butterfly, focus group)

The participants demonstrated understanding of the steps required to raise awareness about the issue of traveling for health care. They suggested using the photos to convey their story to the town council. This section focuses on exploring the obstacle of traveling for health care and its impact on learning. Within this subtheme, the participants also discussed the significant influence of grief and loss on their mental health.

Mental health compounded by grief

The last sub theme within Contextual Obstacles to Learning is *mental health compounded by grief.* This subtheme referred to the underlying and unresolved mental health issues that participants lived with every day, and how the deaths of their loved ones (suicide and natural deaths) worsened their mood and morale. Participants revealed how mental health and low morale influenced their ability to reach their full potential. Table described her experience:

> *It feels depressing around here sometimes. What I need is more motivation. Maybe just a little bit more. Just encouragement. I know some students don't get that at home. Some students don't have those people at home or those parents that are encouraging or things like that. So maybe school could do it more. I'm lucky that I do have that. But I think depression is a big issue at our school which is preventing students from reaching their full potential.* (Individual interview, Table).

Table continued on this topic by mental health as related to external factors:

> *We have a mental health nurse, but no one goes to see her. Like depression isn't just a head thing, it's an environmental thing. It's good to have support, but what the school can do is focus on improving the rest* (individual interview, Table).

I was curious about what she meant by the school "improving the rest", and she continued to speak to that:

> *There isn't much extracurricular, there's nothing to do, nothing to look forward to. We are just a bunch of depressed students making it one day at a time. Especially the ones that don't plan on going to college.* (Individual interview, Table)

I asked how the students could improve the morale of the school, and Table responded:

> *We want more opportunities and space to make friends, laugh and just be kids. Because COVID and all, we can only get to school, go to our lockers and go to classes. We need the space to get together, and then we will get together.* (Individual interview, Table)

The COVID-19 pandemic restrictions have had a significant impact on students' ability to gather and socialize. Due to the restrictions, students are unable to sit together in the cafeteria. However, in a casual conversation with a teacher, it was noted that there has been some flexibility in enforcing these rules to prioritize the well-being of the students. It is important to consider that for several participants, like Table, their high school experience has been solely during the pandemic, which means they might not be fully aware of the school's strengths and potential without the limitations imposed by the pandemic.

Cookie presented a perspective on absenteeism that had both similarities and differences. Initially, I perceived her remarks as hinting at a sense of laziness regarding school attendance. However, upon deeper analysis of the data, it became clear that Cookie experienced frequent anxiety and struggled with sleep, leading to fatigue and anxiety in the mornings. Her quote also revealed a sense of self-blame.

> *I'm the main reason I missed the bus. Sleep in or something came up at home so I go to bed late.* (Individual interview, Cookie)

> *Well I have a hard time sleeping at night, so when I wake up I'm tired and super anxious sometimes and the only way to make it better is to go back to bed. So I skip school.* (Individual interview, Cookie)

Astro's photovoice also shed light on his mental health struggles. According to him, his experiences fluctuate between good and bad days, with no in-between. Photo 8 visually represents the individual challenges he encounters:

Photo 8

Rinse and Recycle

"I can't get to school because I have depression. Some days are good, and some days are bad, rinse and recycle." (Photo 8; photovoice by Astro)

Butterfly expressed similar struggles: "*I have pretty bad anxiety sometimes, so I don't feel like going to school on those days.*" (Individual interview, Butterfly). Further to this point, Table shared:

> *I know I'm bored. I stay in and don't hang out with people because there's nothing to do. So you stay in. That's depression. That's why people drink for fun. I don't drink but I know lots of my friends do. On good days I go to school, come home. On bad days I just stay home, I don't even go anywhere. I want to go to class and do fun things. I want to see different places, but our town stays the same. There's nothing to do. We can go for walks. That's about it.* (individual interview, Table)

The topic of mental health and grief was further explored in the Focus Group, where the community's history of recent suicides was discussed. The participants not only mourned the loss of their friends and/or loved ones but also grappled with their own mental health challenges.

> *People struggle badly here. We had lots of suicides. Like we lost a few classmates. It's hard. Because we all struggle with mental health, and then people die.* (Jay, focus group)

The silence that followed the previous statement carried a profound weight, and I interpreted it as a poignant reflection of the profound impact of losing multiple individuals to suicide. Drawing upon my experience as a psychotherapist, I embraced the silence, allowing the participants to determine when they were ready to resume the conversation. The silence persisted for precisely 74 seconds until the next person chose to share.

> *It's hard because you feel like who's next to die?* (Table, focus group)
>
> *Thank you for sharing that.* (silence; 74 seconds noted from audio recording) *Do you have mental health services here?*
>
> *Like for me, I have anxiety, like social anxiety, and it prevents me from doing hard things. Like the deaths just made it worse for my anxiety, but I think for me it's the anxiety that stops me from showing up at school. But to answer your question, yes we do, but I don't think they are very busy.* (Butterfly, focus group)
>
> *Well I can't say for sure, but we have an Indigenous counsellor here, and we are encouraged to go to them, but I don't know why I don't go.* (Butterfly, focus group)

It was powerful for them to recognize the link between mental health, grief and the lack of services being used. I chose not to probe further on this topic and redirected the conversation to other reasons they attribute to missing school.

Theme Two: Isolation Stunting Youth Development

The second theme, "Isolation Stunting Youth Development," encompasses the sub themes of limited opportunities, darkness, and boredom. Participants identified this theme as a form of non-educational inequity, representing a barrier to the development of youth. However, despite the challenges posed by isolation, a few participants found that it presented unique opportunities due to fewer competitors in specific roles, resulting in greater success. Nevertheless, I interpreted isolation as a significant impediment to youth development. The abundance of photographic and

focus group data provided substantial support for this theme, revealing the struggles participants faced in coping with isolation. The most impactful quote from the focus group encapsulates the concept of double isolation:

> *You are isolated trying to get to an isolated school, it's like you're double isolated living here.* (Table, focus group)

Furthermore, Table shared photo 9, illustrating the desolate feeling associated with being far away from cities. In the photo, train tracks and the surrounding emptiness symbolize a sense of heading towards nothingness. While Table conveyed the dreariness of being away from cities through photo 9, participant Butterfly presented photo 10, describing how the loneliness of living in a small town mirrors the emotions she experienced when standing in front of towering skyscrapers in Toronto. Butterfly expressed feeling small and insignificant in comparison to the imposing building, capturing the existential sensation of loneliness and isolation, particularly highlighting the additional challenges faced by rural youth. I interpreted this as an added layer of struggle resulting from isolation.

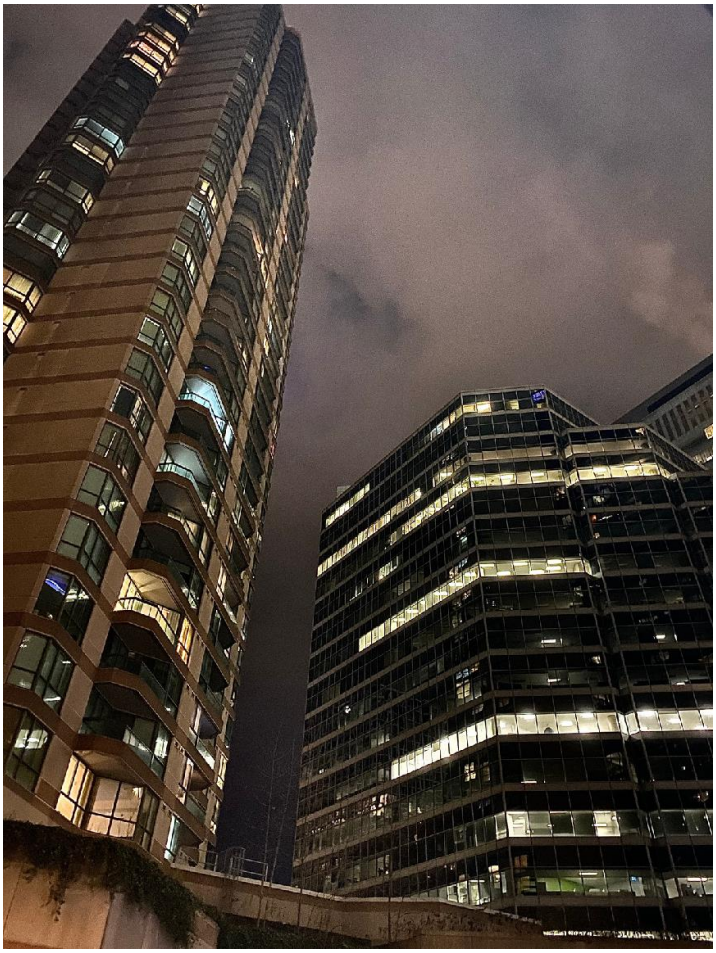
Photo 9

The Train Tracks

"We live so isolated here, far away from everything." (Photo 9; photovoice by Table)

Photo 10

The Skyscrapers



> *"I look at this and realize how big things can be, and how small and far away I feel at times. I feel so alone here looking at these towers. But I feel alone at home too. The difference is simple: everyday things can feel bigger in my community. For city kids, they have options that we can't even imagine because most of us will never experience the privilege of urban life."* (Photo 10; photovoice by Butterfly)

Limited opportunities

The part of the data that reflected isolation, spoke to how difficult it can be having limited opportunities for a rural youth because you live so far away from everything. The data revealed limitations within opportunities for learning and extracurricular activities. A unique finding in the data that doesn't fall under opportunities for learning or extracurricular activities is

lack of housing. At the time of Butterfly's individual interview, she recently became homeless. She spoke with much emotion in her tone about how her mother and she had nowhere to go. There wasn't a homeless shelter they could turn to. Although they had a women's shelter, their situation didn't fit the criteria for admission there.

> *I don't have a home right now because of family stuff. It's kind of overwhelming. I am staying with my aunts right now, but I hope that's not for long.* (individual interview, Butterfly)

> *Because it's hard to sleep on a couch, I don't sleep well. My cat is caged up, and he meows all day and I'm scared someone will do something to it when I come to school. It's so hard because I worry about my cat, but if I miss school to take care of her I worry about missing school. The bigger problem is the fact that we have nowhere to turn to in this town. If we didn't have a family member, we would be shit out of luck.* (Individual interview, Butterfly).

Butterfly was hopeful that they would not remain without a home for very long because her mom was talking to a landlord and she stated that it sounded promising. However, I interpreted that this lack of housing was causing her a lot of distress as shown in her individual interviews. The lack of housing, which is arguably a human right issue, demonstrated how these northern rural communities had limited opportunities for alternative housing in times of crisis.

Butterfly expressed how a lack of learning opportunities limited students' exposure to various career choices, and thus their decisions for post-secondary education were influenced by that limitation. Butterfly is a student who excels in school. She discovered through socially immersing herself with friends that she no longer wanted to become a doctor and wanted to be a baker. However, she spoke how it was much easier to line herself up in high school to become a doctor then it is to become a pastry chef:

> *More learning opportunities outside the regular stuff. More community learning and placement options. For example, kids in big cities who want to become a baker and make wedding cakes can do placements at an amazing pastry shop. We don't have that. We have youtube. We could go to a Freshmart (a local grocery store) and look at the person*

> *making a vanilla cake with vanilla icing. Right, but we have no idea what it takes to make a fancy cake.* (Individual interview, Butterfly).

Similarly, in the Focus Group, I brought up opportunities in the communities and how it supported or affected them, and a participant shared:

> *The good thing about the school is that the school tries to appreciate culture. I've noticed we do have cool things, like opportunities to go drum and smudge and make dream catchers things like that. There are opportunities for community hours but not many. Sometimes there will be an announcement telling us about opportunities to volunteer for community hours.* (Table, Focus group)

> *I think I need more opportunities in life. Like more art clubs, more travel, more options to know who we are. A lot of these students don't get much of that at home* (Butterfly, Focus group)

However, another participant spoke about her amazing opportunity, and how unlikely this opportunity would be for her in a larger school:

> *Currently I am the student trustee so that's a really good opportunity. I don't think I would have got that in another big school, but. I just applied for the position which is a really good opportunity. But I'd say other than that, maybe not the best opportunities here. Just because of the community, and how small it is. Not lots of interest in doing much for us youth* (individual interview, Table).

Opportunities for learning was also something that Jay echoed in his individual interview: *"Our school excels at preparing us for the trade jobs, but limited opportunities for other non-forestry, mechanic type careers"* (Individual interview, Jay). This quote supports what Butterfly shared in her individual interview in regards to being able to line herself up to become a doctor rather than a baker. Albeit a doctor or a baker is a different career path than forestry, but nonetheless it is important to make note that participants express that the school prepares students for only certain career options. Further to this end, Butterfly discussed how isolation influences recruitment, and educational placement options. She also makes a point to say that

even though youth in cities can have similar social and emotional struggles as them, the urban youth have options for opportunities that rural youth do not have:

> *It's so isolated here that no one wants to come here to a small muddy town. I didn't choose to live here, and I'm scared to move away but yet I'm stuck. Youth in cities don't have to worry about that in the same way. They didn't have to work for it or tell people that that's what they need to be their best self because its already there for them. If they don't want to do a placement, that's fine, but at least the option to do one because we don't have that.* (Individual interview, Butterfly)

Table expressed in her individual interview how she wished they had more chances to do extracurricular activities. She also advocated for more than just the basic opportunities, arguing that the school needs more:

> *I'd say we don't have opportunities for extracurricular things or just activities. I wish we did though. We need to have the same opportunities that other kids in big cities in the south get. There needs to be a minimum threshold that each kid has access to no matter if you're in a small or big school, or isolated or not.* (Individual interview, Table).

Astro shared photo 11, and it reflects how the school has limited opportunities. Astro took photo 11 of the sidewalk on the way to grab food for lunch. He described this photo as focusing on how the town is as limited as the school; how the activities are none, and how that leads youth to drugs and alcohol because there's nothing better to do. In the same way, Jay shared photo 12 and voiced how the town has nothing and it can bring you down, but mindfulness in nature lifts him up.

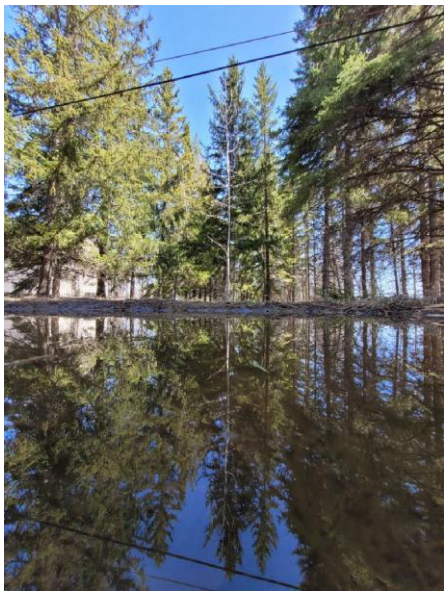
Photo 11

There's Nothing Here for Us

"This photo is of a main street in the town. There aren't much opportunities here. It's pretty dead." (photo 11, photovoice by Astro)

Photo 12

Mindfulness



"It's not a good town, there isn't much to do for people our age. There's a lot of drugs and crime here now, we aren't set up for a bright future. There aren't things to do that's fun to distract us from the bad stuff. I listen to birds and wind, and that's really nice though. Sometimes when I am bored, I'll go for a walk around to enjoy the weather and the sounds like birds, winds on the trees and the birds" (photo 12 photovoice by Jay)

Limited opportunities had a profound impact on the participants' morale in various ways. The constraints imposed by their isolated environment further exacerbated the challenges they faced. While the participants found it challenging to identify solutions to enhance opportunities, one individual mentioned the potential efficacy of mindfulness as a tool. In the subsequent section, I delve into darkness as a subtheme.

Darkness

Darkness, as a sub theme within the broader theme of the hardships of isolation, surfaced from both the focus group discussions and photographic data, encompassing both its literal and

metaphorical connotations. In photo 13, Astro captured the essence of physical darkness and isolation by sharing an image of his downtown at 8pm on a winter night. He described the scene as desolate, ominous, and unnerving. Additionally, he noted that regardless of the time in their town, once darkness falls, people seem to vanish from sight.

Photo 13

Darkness

> *"This is downtown at 8pm. Once 5 o'clock hits, everything shuts down. We are isolated and lonely. Even though it's really early, it feels like it's the middle of the night. Reminds me how far we are and alone. Makes you feel removed from socialization...a reminder of how isolated we are."* (photo 13; photovoice by Astro)

Moreover, during the focus group session, the participants extensively discussed the pervasive darkness and dreariness that characterizes their environment, which resonated with their lived experiences of residing in this locality.

> *It's just dark all the time. Now it's Spring so it's getting nicer and easier to cope, but it seems like when fall hits, and because we don't have much lights here, it just seems so dark and depressing.*

When I asked if this was isolated to northern Ontario, a participant in the focus group responded:

> *Both; I know we get winter in Canada and all that, but it just seems that much darker here, almost like a dark cloud over it.*

The focus group extensively discussed the challenges of limited activities and expressed concerns about the escalating issues of drugs and alcohol, which are adversely affecting the town. In contrast, Jay utilized the metaphor of darkness to symbolize the multitude of hardships and negativity he faces in his life. Describing his photo 14, Jay depicted a dimly lit yard with sparse Christmas lights, mirroring the experience of residing in this community.

Photo 14

Sprinkles of Light

> *The darkness in my life is school bullies, drama, family problems, bad addictions, health problems. You have to force yourself to see the light, because it's easier to keep your eyes closed but that's not a good life.* (photo 14, photovoice by Jay*).*

The figurative aspect of darkness holds significant power in its own way. Jay provided insights into this aspect, stating during an individual interview: "School is quiet. There's a lot of darkness and light in here. (…) Lots of depression and mental health issues." When further exploring the meaning of darkness, Jay added: "Lots of sadness, poverty, and the struggle are real for some people." The metaphor of darkness symbolizes the hardships they endure.

In an isolated setting, darkness descends swiftly, devoid of any illuminating streetlights. The youth described how their only recourse is to go for walks together, but the early onset of darkness can be intimidating. Consequently, Jay and Astro choose to remain indoors.

> *There's nothing to do but walk, but when it's dark, no one goes outside really. There isn't anything to walk to, you know. So I stay in.* (Individual Interview, Astro)

> *I wish I could go to something after school, but it gets dark early, so I just stay home.* (Individual interview, Jay)

The presence of limited opportunities further exacerbates the sense of depression associated with residing in an isolated community. The final subtheme highlights the profound boredom experienced within such a setting. Several participants conveyed their sentiments through photovoice, portraying their experiences of boredom, while the majority expressed that the lack of recreational options in the community stemmed from its small size.

Boredom

Boredom emerged as a prominent theme during the analysis, appearing in the codes 12 times, signifying its frequent occurrence. Participants conveyed their experiences of boredom outside of school through shared photos and discussions. Table, in photo 15, depicted the lack of

activities in the town, capturing the essence of aimless walking. The photo showcases a road with main streetlights in the background, symbolizing the monotony and absence of options. Similarly, Butterfly also expressed the sentiment of having nothing to do in photo 16.

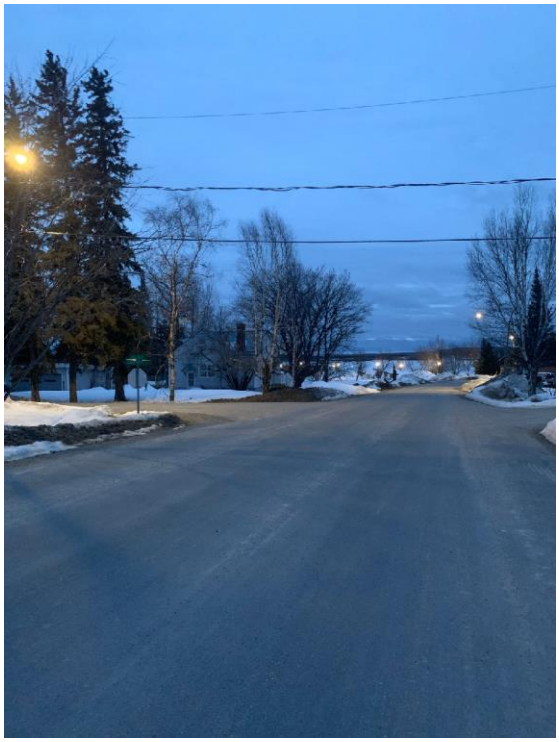
Photo 15

Small Town Nothings

"Small town nothings. It's boring here, especially at night. I wonder what people are doing? Right, nothing." (photo 15; photovoice by Table)

Photo 16

Walking



> *"There is not much to do here. So I walk and walk and walk, just to get out of the house. This is my favourite spot to walk to. Here is where I clear my head, where I get inspiration to keep going. But I wish we had more to do here, like be able to have a part-time job, or something to do other than walk."* (photo 16; photovoice by Butterfly).

Some of the participants recognized boredom as a contributor to drugs, alcohol, and depression.

> *What do people do when they are bored? Some people drink, do drugs, others do nothing or find their own fun. But the common denominator is being bored with nothing to do outside of the house and school.* (Individual interview, Astro).

Moreover, in photo 17, Butterfly portrayed the feeling of stir-craziness caused by the lack of activities. She captured the courtyard from the deck of an apartment, symbolizing the limited options for engagement and the resulting restlessness.

Photo 17

Courtyard

> *"This little closed off area reminds me of what it is like to live where we live, and go to school where we go. Because there is nothing in there; there are trees and it looks nice. It's a nice place to go and enjoy some time. But there isn't anything to do there, so after a long time you would go crazy just being there." (photo 17; photovoice by Butterfly).*

In conclusion, the theme of Isolation Stunting Youth Development highlights the participants' extensive discussions on the limited opportunities, dark environment, and lack of extracurricular activities, all of which hinder their potential as young individuals. They emphasized how the limited opportunities within the school impact their learning and personal growth. The metaphorical darkness of isolation was also explored, emphasizing the challenges they face in their community. Additionally, the theme of boredom was linked to various issues such as substance abuse, mental health concerns, and feelings of loneliness. Moving forward, the following section introduces the third theme, "School as a Place of Belonging."

Theme Three: School as a Place of Belonging

The third theme explores School as a Place of Belonging, addressing key questions related to northern rural and remote education's role in youth development. This theme emerged consistently across all participants' interviews, photovoice, and focus group discussions. It encompasses the notion of the school environment and the relationships within it, evoking a sense of home for the participants. Within this theme, three sub themes were identified: strong connection to teachers, a supportive learning environment, and emotional safety. Each subtheme highlights the participants' perception of the school as a safe haven. They classified this theme as an aspect of educational equity, contributing to positive youth development by fostering connection, relationships, and personal growth. Participant Table expressed her love for her school and its greatness despite the challenges through Photo 18.

Photo 18

Safe place

> *"This represents us. This is our merchandise for the school. As much as there's some not so good things here, there are many good things. I love my school."* (photo 18; photovoice by Table)

Strong Connection to my Teachers

The first subtheme in School as a Place of Belonging focuses on the strong connection participants have with their teachers. Through analyzing the participants' statements, the study aimed to identify positive aspects of their school experience, particularly highlighting how teachers positively influenced them. It is noteworthy that this sub theme did not emerge in the photovoice images, but evidence supporting a strong teacher-student connection was found in the transcripts. This absence in photovoice may be attributed to the restriction on taking pictures of individuals without explicit consent. However, the abundance of transcripts discussing the connection to teachers is remarkable. To illustrate, I will now share an excerpt from Butterfly's individual interview:

> *All of our teachers are nice to us. I mean most of the time, like if we make mistakes—that's different. But they are like our friends, but smarter than us. They give us shit if we do something wrong. But the relationship is good irregardless. It's good.* (Individual interview, Butterfly)

In this quote, Butterfly demonstrates her awareness of the strong relationship she shares with her teachers, highlighting the mutual respect they have for each other. Similarly, Table expressed the supportive nature of the relationship with their teachers, stating, "Teachers are all mostly really supportive" (Individual interview, Table). Furthermore, Jay emphasized his close bond with two specific teachers, whom he leans on due to the well-developed connection they have formed:

> *I really get along with the teacher… and teacher… They are good to me. I can be honest with them, and them to me too. They check in, they always say hi, they ask how my sister is doing, and my mom. We talk about the outdoors, and fishing. We're cool*. (individual interview, Jay)

> *I like our teachers, they're cool and smart. They ask us how we are every day, and talk to us about stuff we have talked to them about in the past, like the small things count.* (Individual interview, Astro)

These quotes highlight significant keywords that signify a strong connection, including words such as support, getting along, asking about each other's loved ones, being vulnerable, and fostering a solid relationship where teachers can be honest with their students. The crucial component of establishing a strong connection lies in building a solid foundational relationship, which is achieved through the passage of time, physical proximity, and frequent interaction.

> *I find that because we see our teacher's lots, and like I'm in grade 12 so I've had them as my teacher for a while, but like outside of school, we get close to them, because we see their kids.*
>
> *I babysit their kids.*
>
> *Yea, like [participant's name] babysits their kids so he trusts us too, like with his kids you know.*

This quote highlights the participants' multiple relationships with their teachers and emphasizes how these relationships contribute to the foundation of their strong connection. One participant eloquently described how these connections fostered a conducive learning environment due to the mutual respect they share. Cookie beautifully articulated this sentiment, stating:

> *Most teachers here are respectful to you and have patience too. Like they actually talk to you about how you're feeling instead of, you know, getting mad at you for staying in their class even if the bell rang. They have kind hearts. You know that they are genuinely nice people who are teachers. (Pause) Like learning is important to our teachers and don't get me wrong, I do my work because I know I'll get in shit by [the principal] if I don't, but we, us, we matter to them and you feel it. (Pause) They want us to do well. Like they try to connect with us, they sit with us in silence too. They are more than our teachers.* (Individual interview, Cookie).

When given the opportunity to provide further insight, Cookie elaborated:

> *They are our friends but not, like they do keep us in line. But they know a lot about different subjects so if we need help in geography, they can help. (laugh) they are amazing.* (Individual interview, Cookie)

Strong relationships with teachers play a significant role in the school environment and greatly

influence the participants' motivation to attend school. The following quotes highlight the close bonds formed between students and teachers due to frequent interactions and the teachers' involvement in multiple classes.

> *I'm a senior now so I know these teachers more now. They taught me lots of different classes. So it got us closer. It's respect. I don't see them much outside of school though, it's kinda why I show up to school* (individual interview, Astro).

> *I think because our school is so small we become very close to our teachers. We see them at hockey or the grocery store or at the park, but we also have the same teacher for lots of different classes*. (Individual interview, Butterfly)

> *It helps because I have great relationships with teachers.* (Individual interview, Cookie)

> *The teachers here are well rounded and smart and I look up to them.* (individual interview, Cookie)

> *I'm not used to teachers being so cool, supportive, and nice and all that stuff. We have good ones here*. (Individual interview, Cookie)

> *Relationships to your peers and teachers are important* (individual interview, Butterfly)
> *It's easier to go to school when you know your friends are there, and teachers are nice.* (Individual interview, Butterfly)

> *I think because our school is so small we become very close to our teachers. We see them at hockey or the grocery store or at the park, so when we see them at school, we feel ever closer.* (Individual interview, Butterfly)

> *The part I am most sad about graduating is that I wont see [teacher] anymore. He's like a really cool teacher and that makes me sad. K, I don't want to think about it.* (Individual interview, Butterfly)

The sub-theme of "Strong Connection to My Teachers" signifies the meaningful relationships participants had with their teachers, leading them to feel valued and supported. Astro expressed this sentiment in his quote: "If it wasn't for my teachers cheerleading me on, it wouldn't be the same, they make it feel like we all belong" (individual interview, Astro). This quote highlights the impact of belonging and support on the school environment, creating a positive and safe

space. Transitioning to the next sub-theme, "Supportive Learning Environment," the data revealed participants' experiences of school as a second home, emphasizing the supportive atmosphere fostered within the school.

Supportive Learning Environment

The sub-theme of "Supportive Learning Environment" falls under the overarching theme of "School as a Place of Belonging," highlighting how the school environment facilitates and encourages learning. This sub-theme is supported by data collected from individual interviews, the focus group, and photovoice. In Butterfly's individual interview, she succinctly captured the significance of the respect students hold for their teachers in promoting learning: "we respect them more and that helps us learn, you know" (Individual interview, Butterfly). Expanding on this notion, Table emphasized the advantage of a smaller school size, which allows for fewer students in each class and more personalized attention from teachers when assistance is needed:

> *There aren't many advantages to being educated in a small town other than small classrooms; you get more help from teachers because they have more time.* (Individual interview, Table).

Continuing the discussion on the relationship between school size and learning, Cookie expressed how the supportive environment of their school makes it easier for students to seek help from teachers when it comes to their learning:

> *Um, it feels pretty good to come here. Like it's not really big, but it's the perfect size and there's not a lot of kids so you don't get overwhelmed walking the hallways. So yeah, it's pretty good. The teachers, the EAs and even the principal are nice and everyone knows each other, so we aren't afraid to ask a question or for help on an assignment.* (Individual interview, Cookie)

In addition, Cookie shared photo 19, which visually represents the physical environment within the classroom. The photo showcases a sofa, a kitchen area, tables, individual desks, and access to computers. While these elements may be visible in the image, what is not immediately apparent

is the inclusive nature of this space, as explained by Cookie. She emphasized that this area is open to all students in the school, providing a welcoming space for students to gather during their breaks. Cookie's expression of happiness while sharing the photo highlights the positive impact this environment has on her. Furthermore, Butterfly found the calm learning environment conducive to productivity, as it relieved the pressure of completing tasks within strict time constraints.

Photo 19

My safe place

> *This room is my safe place. Its where I learn, do my work, and chat with my friends. There's a kitchen if I'm hungry...There's a couch if I need to relax. I get help from my teacher here if I need it too.* (Photo 19; Photovoice by Cookie)

The following quote from Butterfly touches on how the atmosphere within of the class extends beyond into the school:

> *Even when we are at school, it's chill. I get to sit at a table with my friends and learn. It's not overwhelming. If we don't finish the work, there's no pressure and that makes me finish my work, like I'm not on edge trying to finish the thing before the bell rings, if that makes sense."* (Individual interview, Butterfly)

Participants mentioned how their school friends are important parts to their educational journey. In photo 20, Table described this hallway as an area where they should not congregate but they do nonetheless result in friendships flourishing. Even though school is hard, those friendships help balance it out.

Photo 20

The Hallway

> *"It's just a hallway that I look at everyday. We are not supposed to hang out here, but we do. I connect with people in hallways. School is hard. But having my good friends makes it easier."* (photo 20; photovoice by Table)

The statement highlights how one participant's motivation to attend school is fueled by the presence of a particular friend. Astro finds the opportunity to see this friend as the driving force behind her willingness to go to school. However, once at school, Astro focuses on her work and

follows her regular school routine. This interpretation suggests that friendships serve as a catalyst for her school attendance and consequently contribute to the overall learning experience:

> *Well in grade 9, it was rough because I didn't really have friends, but then in grade 10 I found *****. She's my person. So even though I don't feel like going to school, I go because I'll see her. So I guess that helps me learn in a roundabout way* (individual interview, Astro).

Growth, in essence, is a manifestation of learning that parallels development and maturity. Within this context, friendships played a pivotal role in facilitating self-discovery, as engaging in new experiences and adventures with friends prompted a transformative shift in their perception of the future. Notably, one participant shared an instance where their career trajectory was altered as a result of self-discovery ignited by friendships. As this participant expressed:

> *"I'm in grade 12 now. So at first I always thought I wanted to be a doctor because that's what smart kids do. It's a good job with lots of money. But then I met ****** and she wasn't as good at school so she hung out with people more. Like I helped her with school and she helped me see that focusing only on school and not friends was holding me back. The good thing about it all is that I want to be a baker now. I always loved baking and the arts behind it. But, I think I wanted to be a doctor because everyone was like "Oh, be a doctor… a doctor is really good, you know?"* (Individual interview, Butterfly).

The quote holds immense power, as it highlights the profound impact of finding balance through friendship, leading her to uncover her true passion beyond the realm of academics. It is akin to a transformative journey of self-discovery, where her love for baking emerged as a potent force, catalyzed by the presence of a meaningful friendship.

While friends, a calm learning environment, and a safe school were beneficial for most participants, Jay's experience at school was not always positive. Jay captured this sentiment in photo 11, expressing that attending school doesn't necessarily improve or alleviate his struggles. In his perspective, school can sometimes feel like a hellish experience.

Photo 21

School can be Hell

"It's where I start my mornings every single day. Gateway to my future, and gateway to hell. My hell it is not necessarily school, but everything outside of it can trickle in and come with me. School doesn't always make things better." (Photo 21; Photovoice by Jay)

Participants conveyed their appreciation for a supportive learning environment, emphasizing the comfort and sense of calm it provides. While some participants acknowledged that school is not always a positive experience because of the teasing, gossiping and vandalism, the consensus is that it fosters a home-like environment. Emotional safety, the final subtheme within this theme, was also prominently evident in the data, underscoring its significance.

Emotional Safety

The subtheme of emotional safety emerged as participants reflected on their experiences at school and the factors that influenced their ability to attend and remain there. The majority of participants expressed a sense of emotional safety within the school environment. They described being able to authentically express themselves, displaying openness and vulnerability. Throughout the interviews, several participants shared instances where they felt accepted and embraced in all aspects of their identity. Their mental health, cultural backgrounds, sexual orientation, and various emotional expressions were met with support. In relation to this, Table shared photo 12, which depicted two birds that she consistently observed in the same location

during her drive to school. She made numerous attempts to capture the photo, as she believed it symbolized a special bond they shared. Finally successful, she intended to convey how the image reflects the safety and connection fostered among individuals at school.

Photo 22

The Eagle and the Crow

> *"These two birds are not biologically compatible...an eagle and a crow do not usually befriend each other. But when I drove by on my way to school one morning, I started noticing they are always together. Like our school, different people flock together and support diversity because our school fosters that. It shows that when we all want something, we can achieve it together."* (photo 22; photovoice by Table)

The interpretation suggests that the school's support for diversity fosters a sense of belonging for all individuals involved:

> *We have an LGBTQ and Indigenous room, which is great because we have lots of Indigenous students and some people who identify as non-binary or gay.* (Individual interview, Cookie).

However, despite that, the school could offer more activities to support wellness. More activities are needed to help strengthen relationships and friendships with other fellow students at *the selected school*:

> *Our school needs more student activities, we have some group sports. Which is good, But I would want more non-sports ones outside of those. Like more activities so we can get to know each other more and more kind of thing…like bonding with people through common activities like an art club, a card playing club, crafts clubs, homework clubs and book clubs would be amazing.* (Individual interview, Cookie).

The school promotes acceptance and embraces diversity, as evident in photo 23. However, there is a recognition that additional opportunities are needed to foster closer relationships among peers, as echoed in the focus group discussions.

> *No one judges here. I just want more chances to get to know other students. Because of COVID we don't really have the opportunity to mingle with people outside of your clique* (Individual interview, Table).

Photo 23

The Plants

> *"These are a mixture of plants, flourishing at different paces. Like us at the school... a bunch of everything...different people, cultures, learning needs and we all just come together and accept each other here."* (photo 23; photovoice by Cookie).

The school environment provides a space for students to navigate a range of emotions, even during challenging days. This highlights the emotional awareness and intelligence of the teachers and staff who create an atmosphere that allows students to embrace and express their authentic selves.

> *It's nice to be able to have a shit day and have others be there for you by listening, or just sitting in silence with you. You don't feel so alone because of that.* (Individual interview, Jay).

In photo 24 the photo depicts a main hallway of the school. On the far left, you see a friend's hand showing a downward "peace" sign. The photo contextualizes the school by stating that no matter what the day brings, students come to school and feel connected and emotionally safe.

Photo 24

There's Always Someone Here

> *"Our hallway in the school. I see this every single day. Its very quiet and lonely. But it's also where I feel the most connected. Like, no matter how I am feeling... I come here and there will be at least one friend to try and pick up your mood."* (Photo 24; Photovoice by Jay)

Teachers are available when students need it, regardless of the situation. Teachers know the students well enough to pick up on the cues emitted by students signaling their need for space or support. Furthermore, teachers provide emotional support to their students:

> *Like, teachers are helpful for more than school, they see us struggling and they are able to get to know our good and bad days, so they know when things are off (*individual interview, Butterfly).

> *The most helpful is Mr. ******Like when he found out I lost my friend to suicide, he was really kind. Gave me extra space to cry* (individual interview, Table)

> *My friends, my cat and my teachers are helpful. That's about it. Yea, so that's why it feels the best at school when I am sad or going through hard shit, you know.* (Individual interview, Cookie)

> *I have had good and bad experiences in this school. Like one day, I was having a really hard day. A couple of students I didn't know yet asked me if I was okay. And then this one teacher stopped me and she just stood there. She brought me into her room, and she asked me how I was doing and told me to just sit there. So I told her I wasn't ok, and she just sat in silence with me and let me breathe. When I was ready I talked to her and she was there for me. You know, she didn't get mad at me. She was just there for me. It was really nice.* (individual interview, Cookie)

> *I guess I could (speak to someone if I felt low or upset). It's alright here, but it's still just school. A means to an end*. (individual interview, Jay)

Although bullying and vandalism did not emerge as a distinct subtheme, it is crucial to acknowledge that these issues were notable within the data. While participants generally experienced emotional safety at school, it is important to recognize that physical safety was not always guaranteed. Cookie shed light on the negative aspects of her school by expressing:

> *Bad experiences here happen in the bathroom, there's stuff written about you on the walls, like when no one is around. There's a big group of girls in the bathroom. And like they would just say stuff to hurt you, then laugh, and then throw stuff at you." (Things like) Toilet paper rolls, and used napkins. I wouldn't let it bug me because I don't let most things get to me. But yeah, that happens quite a bit.* (individual interview, Cookie)

When I asked what could help stop this if they tell their Vice Principal about it, Cookie responded:

> *"Well, I think we need a designated graffiti wall for something, I don't know. I just know that we have lots of artsy kids in the school, and it would be monitored by teachers more"* (individual interview, Cookie)

Table shared photo 25, depicting the view from the female bathroom in their school. The presence of vandalism in the photo is disheartening, as described by Table. Although she did not capture specific messages in the photo, she expressed her dismay at the frequent occurrence of such acts. Table conveyed her frustration and disappointment upon witnessing other students deface school property with writings.

Photo 25

Vandalism

> *"It's discouraging to see our school get vandalized like this. I want to be proud of the school. I am proud, but things like this doesn't make me proud."* (photo 25; photovoice by Table)

In this research, it was important to explore the participant-youth's perspectives on potential solutions to alleviate or mitigate the barriers they faced in their educational journey. Consequently, during the data analysis, I identified and coded the solutions proposed by the youth. Within this theme, several participants shared ideas aimed at fostering a supportive learning environment and enhancing emotional safety. More solutions were brought forth in the focus group, as one participant discussed how it would be nice to have an outdoor exercise gym, or a garden space: *"I'd like to have a gym outside so we could exercise in the spring, fall and summer during school breaks"* (Jay, Focus Group)**.** Additionally, Cookie shared:

> *"Students need to take the lead on these clubs, because teachers don't know what we need. (...) Us students could make a little plan and present it to our principal and if he says ok, we could start organizing it at lunch hour or something". Get together and do crafts, color and do stuff. Like a wellness room. Like we could do crafts and arts, sell them and fundraise for snacks"* (individual interview, Cookie)

In conclusion, the major theme of "School as a Place of Belonging" reflects the participants' sense of comfort, acceptance, and support within the school environment. The strong connection to teachers plays a crucial role in fostering positive relationships. The presence of a supportive learning environment contributes to the students' continued growth and development. Additionally, emotional safety serves as the foundation for maintaining connections and well-being. However, it is important to acknowledge that incidents of vandalism and bullying negatively impact the emotional safety of the participants. Overall, these subthemes collectively portray the school as a second home, where learning, emotions, diversity, and cultures are embraced and supported.

Theme four: Importance of Flexible Approach to Learning

The final theme is the Importance of a Flexible Approach to Learning. It has three subthemes: Idiographic curriculum, virtual learning, and learning outside the classroom. Participants classified this theme as educationally equitable. It outlines how a flexible environment promotes equitable learning.

The first subtheme is idiographic curriculum, which refers to a distinctive pedagogy and content tailored to individual needs. This sub theme emerged from the data as many participants expressed gratitude for attending this high school that provides teachings and learning experiences aligned with their strengths. However, participants also expressed a desire for more recognition of land-based activities in terms of credits and grades. The discussions revolved around the flexibility of assignments, online learning, and the constraints surrounding applied and academic courses.

Idiographic curriculum

The subtheme of idiographic curriculum emerged from the data as participants described their education as distinct and unique. As I analyzed the data, the concept of uniqueness stood out, characterized by a balance between contextualization and standardization, while also emphasizing the need for further flexibility in terms of materials and lessons. This subtheme encompassed both the standard curriculum and the modifications made by the school staff to ensure flexibility in learning, particularly during the pandemic. The first aspect of this sub theme explored how the current curriculum can restrict some students' learning due to the potential irrelevance of the materials.

> *I do good in school. But I find a lot of the stuff we learn not important. I know I get told that it will all make sense one day. But I want to know about the impact of climate change, not the recap of geography they have to teach us.* (individual interview, Table).

Another perspective is that the school does their best to try to teach within their parameters while expanding on the possibilities. However, these efforts are not always geared to student's strengths:

> *What I learn is interesting some of the time, but I think the problem is our teachers have to follow a guide in what to teach us. We learn the same stuff as everyone else in grade twelve taking academic English. It's not geared to my strengths, so my growth gets stunted.* (individual interview, Jay)

> *I personally wish that school was more personalized to our goals and needs, but I know it would be impossible to teach a big class. But our classes are not big here, so maybe it could work. I don't know.* (…)*"Well, I suck at math. I'm probably never going to do math without the internet, why do I have to take math? I am amazing at art, why can't I do more social studies that would help me be a better artist?* (Butterfly, Focus group)

While some participants expressed a desire for more personalized education, others acknowledged and appreciated the efforts made by their teachers to adapt their teaching methods and cater to the strengths and needs of the students.

> *Like for this research, I'm not getting marks but [the teacher] talked about how research skills will help us later when we are working by knowing when to gather information on a topic before making decisions. I'm learning right now.* (Individual interview, Astro).

Teachers adapt the curriculum to help students complete their coursework to graduate. Further to this point, teachers adapt the curriculum to help make up for the unintended absences that occur:

> *if it wasn't for the flexible assignments, I don't think I could be graduating* (individual interview, Jay)

> *The amount of school I missed because of the pandemic and all the other stuff like bus issues, it would be impossible to catch up* (individual interview, Jay).

> *I know teachers try to count as much stuff we do here and at home towards credits because they know how much we fight to show up every day. Like not all students want to be here, but the majority of us do. So they try to help us in that way as much as possible. Sometimes I do workbooks, and that gets marked. It's good.* (Jay, Focus group*)*

Photo 26

Elastic vibes

"This photo reminds me of how flexible my schoolwork is here. The elastic is not rigid. It moves easily, it stretches to accommodate the pressure. Sort of like my assignments." (Photo 26, Photovoice by Astro)

Aside from a few instances, teachers made concrete efforts to help students accelerate through the curriculum by modifying it in a unique way to fit the needs of students. For example, I discovered that the participant who learned about all the birds received marks for it, as he stated in his photo selection session,

> *I told my teacher about the Northwestern Ontario bird study I did during the pandemic, and he came up with an assignment that counted towards my marks* (photo selection session, Astro).

Despite the bird study being recognized and counted towards their marks, there was a notable absence of formalized land-based learning opportunities. Students expressed their desire to have more experiential learning on the land incorporated into their high school journey.

> *There is lots to learn from going out in the bush for a weekend, the trees, the weather, the geography, climate change at its finest. It is not something we could technically do at this point and have it count as credits for our diploma* (individual interview, Astro).

The streaming system, which pre-determines the material students learn based on academic and applied streams, has a negative impact on student learning. This aspect of the curriculum is identified as lacking, as it restricts students and hampers their educational experience.

> *The issue is that academic kids go on with their learning and get real nice jobs. But kids in locally developed areas aren't always not-smart. Sometimes they have more issues at home, but they have to stay at home until they are old enough to graduate. But at that time, it's already too late; those kids are stigmatized, and have a hard time catching up. That is not fair. It's like the system tries to help, but it just creates a different class of kids. And they go off after graduation, not having the same learning as academics trying to do the same work as others; it's just a mess. Those kids can't get into the same schools, and they don't have the same learning, and it affects them for the rest of their lives. That's not fair* (individual interview, Cookie).

Moreover, she expressed her desire to learn the same material as the students in the academic stream, albeit at a slower pace and with additional support. This would enable her to have more post-secondary options upon graduation.

> *"I would like everyone to have the same curriculum, and the tools to learn it. Like not like what it is now where when you're in locally developed and applied, you don't get to go to university. You all learn different things so when I graduate and want to do other stuff, I can't, I have to take a year of training that I need to pay for, to be able to apply to a course. It would be nice if we could learn all the same stuff, but like at different speeds and with extra help. Like repeat lessons often. So then learning would be more fair"* (individual interview, Cookie).

To summarize, the subtheme of idiographic curriculum encompasses various ideas shared by participants. It highlights the need for opportunities to learn the same material as others, which requires additional teaching staff and support. The streaming system in high school was

identified as a factor that forces youth to make early decisions with long-lasting consequences for their future. In the next section, I delve into the topic of virtual learning and present participants' perspectives on its advantages, disadvantages, and potential areas for improvement.

Virtual Learning

Virtual learning emerged as a prominent theme in the data, coinciding with the research project taking place during an ongoing pandemic, even though students had resumed in-person classes. Interestingly, participants did not directly discuss COVID-19's impact on virtual access to learning. Instead, they focused on the potential of online platforms such as Microsoft Teams and Zoom to address challenges related to weather disruptions, travel delays, and personal obstacles that hindered attending in-person classes. During the focus group, participants openly shared their concerns and issues regarding the current utilization of online platforms.

> *Right now, if the bus is cancelled, some teachers will log on to Microsoft teams for the classroom, but how it's set up, it's really hard to learn. . . . Not all teachers or students know how to use it properly, not all teachers log on to share the classroom either. It's not the best option right now"* (Table, Focus group).

> *Because not being there causes you to fall behind, and if you miss certain concepts, you can't learn and expand on others. School goes on without you no matter what (...) Teachers don't really do it (online learning), but some do it. It's hard to learn online because it's set up where you aren't really a part of the class* (individual interview, Table).

> *My brain doesn't function the same at home. I have a bed and a couch. Well I don't have a home at this moment, but when I did have a house, I didn't learn well there. I need a desk so that's why I tried* [to get] *to school as much as I can to get my work done on a desk and table.* (Individual interview, Butterfly)

The availability of a suitable learning environment and necessary equipment is crucial for students' academic progress. While these resources were provided to her at school, they were lacking in her home environment. The challenges associated with online learning, such as limited equipment and unreliable internet connectivity, have posed significant problems. Consequently,

virtual learning has not consistently proven to be an effective and adapted learning environment. As much as some participants cautioned against virtual learning, a few discussed how it could be helpful for them if the school was more committed to online learning.

> *On screen it's a little harder to catch on and follow along. I find that easier in person. Then there's things like technology. Not everybody has knowledge on how it all works. Not everyone has a laptop—you have to sign it out. We weren't taught how to use Zoom or Microsoft teams. Then, there's the Internet. It's very inconsistent. It's getting better, but some people still have dial-up here*. (Individual interview, Jay)

> *It could be glitchy, they could turn in an assignment and it won't show up on your teacher's end because of that. . . . I've had that happen a couple of times"* (individual interview, Table).

Astro expressed in his individual interview that he is proficient with technology and would thrive in an online learning environment due to his tech-savviness. Thus, virtual learning could be advantageous if they enhance the current system for it.

> *I'm good at computers so it would be easier for me to learn online than it is in person* (individual interview, Astro).

Due to numerous barriers that hinder her from attending school regularly, Cookie expressed her desire for online learning as a means to overcome these challenges and improve her attendance.

> *Like I miss quite a bit of school, and I hate it. But it's my reality right now. . . . Lots going on at home, and with my bussing it's hard to get there, but I do think that the school could improve virtual learning for when we miss school (...) Virtual learning would help us if teachers actually sign on to Teams for us to see the lecture. Not all teachers do it* (individual interview, Cookie).

The focus group expanded on this idea as one participant discussed how a virtual reality classroom could be a compliment to in-person education:

> *I mean, like sometimes it's* [difficult] *to find a ride, but also get all the [town name] students, for example, together somewhere and do online schooling with a classroom that is a 3d image or something* (Jay, Focus group).

> *I don't know, it's an idea. But like having a virtual reality classroom that's actually as if we are in our class. Like cameras and microphones at our desks in school, learning from*

> *our desks but at home. Students who can attend school would be there, and we would be learning from the camera and speakers from our desks. I don't know, I just thought of that* (Cookie, Focus group).
>
> *It would be better for us, maybe.* (Table, Focus group)

Virtual learning was identified as a possible way to address commuting issues but only with some improvements: "*teachers and students need to consistently use cameras, and make sure that they log on every day, and we need better access to internet*" (Jay, Focus group). The final subtheme is learning outside of the classroom. This sub theme discusses how participants learn from informal settings in the community and in their school.

Learning Outside of the Classroom

The subtheme of *learning outside of the classroom* emerged from the data as three participants talked about several different teachings they saw as complementing their educational journey:

> *I have to say that my learning here expands outside of the classroom because as much as there is little to do, I* [am] *forced to connect in the nature and recognize what's around me.* (individual interview, Table).
>
> *The school closures were really hard for me because I felt so behind on my schooling. That's when I would go for a walk-in nature. I would be out there hearing birds, and I got curious about these, so I googled* [and accessed] *YouTube and researched so much about birds. Now I know every single bird in Canada.* (Focus group, Jay).

Additionally, Butterfly highlighted her constant quest for knowledge and her passion for baking, which she considers an acquired skill. She emphasized the significance of baking in her self-guided educational journey towards becoming an exceptional pastry chef. In her photo 27, she portrayed her reliance on various mediums to further enhance her understanding and mastery of the art of baking.

YouTube and websites are so helpful because they teach you step by step how to do an artsy design for baking. It's pretty neat. (photo selection, Butterfly)

Photo 27

Art is Everywhere

"This photo is called Art is Everywhere. If you look hard enough you will see art. I don't need Picasso to teach me, I just need to look hard enough and I will see. For me art is baking, I can make really delicious things and really pretty things too." (photo 27; photovoice by Butterfly)

To provide evidence of learning experiences beyond the classroom, photos 28, 29, and 30 were shared. Initially, these images were associated with the codes of "other learning" and "northern climate." However, the photovoice session allowed for a deeper understanding of these pictures as examples of experiential learning in natural settings. Table contributed photo 31, depicting a field where she personally engages in blueberry picking.

Photo 28

Where I Pick Berries

"I pick blueberries here in the summer, usually in August. I realized one day how lucky I am to be able to pick wild blueberries. It's a gateway to health, and to peace from nature. The big open space and the greens... So much gratitude" (photo 28; photovoice by Table).

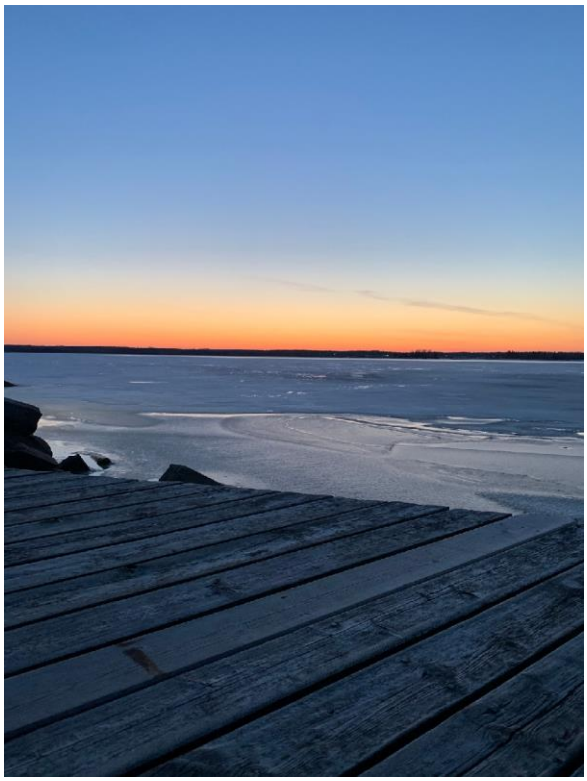
Photo 29

My Biggest Teacher

"My biggest teacher. After it rains, there's always a rainbow. I always search for my pot of gold" (photo 29; photovoice by Butterfly).

Photo 30

The land



"I learn the most out here—solitude, peace, and nature. This counts more than any book will" (photo 30; photovoice by Astro).

In summarizing the learning that occurs outside of the classroom, it is important to note that participants felt compelled to venture outdoors during the pandemic as a means of seeking connection. This exploration led to significant learning experiences for the participants. Some found themselves captivated by nature, while others discovered more about themselves through their outdoor pursuits. A few even regarded the land itself as their teacher. The immeasurable nature of this learning highlights its profound impact on the participants, even if it cannot be easily quantified. This sub theme clearly demonstrates the transformative power of outdoor learning for these individuals.

Summary

In this chapter, the findings of the research project have been presented and discussed. The chapter begins by exploring the obstacles to learning that participants encountered. It is evident that these barriers had a significant impact on their ability to learn. Factors such as the challenging northern climate, reliance on bus transportation, travel for healthcare, and mental health issues compounded by grief were all unavoidable challenges that influenced their educational journey. However, it is worth noting that some participants proposed innovative ideas to address these obstacles, such as taking action at the town council level and establishing a working committee to address transportation issues.

The second theme of the findings centers around the participants' sense of belonging within the school environment. Strong connections with teachers and staff, a supportive learning environment, and emotional safety were all highlighted as contributing factors to their positive experiences at the school.

The third theme explores the impact of isolation on the participants' hardships and morale. It is clear that the experience of isolation intensified their challenges and had a profound effect on their overall well-being.

Lastly, the importance of a flexible learning approach in enhancing interest and knowledge acquisition is discussed as the fourth theme. Participants emphasized the need for a more adaptable curriculum that caters to individual interests and learning styles.

In the next chapter, the interpretations of these findings will be presented, considering the limitations of the study. Additionally, recommendations for future research will be provided to further explore and address the identified issues and themes.

Chapter Six: Discussion

The objective of this qualitative study was to gain insights into educational equity through the perspectives of youth attending a geographically isolated high school. The aim was to shed light on the obstacles to educational success and explore innovative approaches to address disparities by leveraging the strengths of these students. By incorporating photovoice, interviews, and a focus group, this research aimed to capture the lived experiences of the youth and contribute to our understanding of equitable rural education. The findings of this study have provided valuable insights into the barriers and strengths affecting youth development in the *selected high school*. Through their narratives and visual representations, the participants have highlighted the challenges posed by obstacles and isolation, as well as the importance of flexibility in the curriculum and creating a comfortable learning environment for meaningful engagement in education. The outcomes of this research carry significant implications, demonstrating how equities and inequities impact the education of northern, rural youth. In the following section, I will delve deeper into the findings and their implications, examining how these insights can inform efforts to improve educational equity for students in similar contexts.

In this discussion chapter, I delve into the four themes that emerged from the study to discuss and respond to the questions guiding the study. I begin with discussing the experiences of northern, rural youth in terms of educational equity within their high school. Furthermore, I explore the challenges they face in a geographically isolated setting, encompassing spatial, educational, and socio-cultural obstacles. The discussion culminates with an examination of how schooling in a northern rural context shapes the development of these young individuals. Throughout the study, I employed critical consciousness theory as a framework to guide data collection and analysis. The study aimed to foster critical reflection through education, utilizing

methods such as photovoice orientation and conversations, as well as promoting critical action through photovoice. In this context, CCT differs from conventional structural analysis found in critical theory. Freire has delineated the source of power, choice and knowledge dynamics and how that impacts marginalized groups and rural communities in his work of "critical consciousness for education" (Freire, 1974). Therefore, in this study the macro level analysis of power and societal structures of inequality is constructed on a micro level based on the participants' critical analysis of their lived experiences of educational equity and inequity within their sphere of influence. I proceed to analyze the implications of the study, addressing both its strengths and limitations in terms of research design. Finally, I conclude by sharing my researcher's notes, offering recommendations for future research, and suggesting potential avenues for further analysis.

How do northern, rural youth ages 15 to 18 years old experience educational equity in a geographically isolated high school?

School as Place of Belonging

Northern rural youth attending the selected high school experience educational equity through various means. In the initial phase of data collection, I had the privilege of virtually meeting with a teacher from the high school to discuss my research. This meeting provided me with a glimpse into the home-like atmosphere that permeated the virtual classroom. In the background, I observed couches and a kitchen, and students comfortably engaged in their work with earbuds and computers. Throughout our conversation, Andrew exuded approachability, care, and compassion towards his students, even when they occasionally interrupted us. His behavior exemplified a profound respect and admiration for his students, as he spoke highly of their talents and abilities. In fact, he mentioned a student in his class who exhibited a natural

aptitude for photography, hinting that she might be interested in participating in the research to further explore this passion. A few days later, I received an email from Andrew, informing me that several students had expressed their keen interest in the study. The fact that these students voluntarily reached out to me spoke volumes about their character and their dedication to shaping their own futures. Although our interactions were conducted in a virtual setting, I couldn't help but feel a sense of ease and comfort as I observed the students' apparent familiarity and ease within their learning environment. This curiosity led me to ponder how this aspect would manifest in the research findings. Overall, my interactions with teachers and staff further solidified the notion of the deep connections that can be forged between students and their educators.

The selected school's inclusive atmosphere has played a vital role in fostering equity by nurturing an institutional culture that intentionally addresses the interests and needs of geographically isolated students. An exemplary illustration of this can be seen in the students' narratives in the way they feel their teachers hold them in high regard, further supporting the importance of positive teacher-student relationships in fostering a favorable school climate. Students know they are valued at this school because they are the priority of the teachers, and their wellbeing beyond academia is foremost. The findings underscore the significance of teachers connecting with their students and being there for them, as this can contribute to a positive and inclusive school environment. Promoting equity in schools requires the establishment of inclusive, diverse, and fair spaces within the educational environment (Gorski, 2018). This research captured participants' experiences of such spaces, which, in turn, contributed to providing every student with equal opportunities for achievement and success (OECD, 2023).

Inclusion is another aspect of equity that was shared in the participants' narratives as it shed light on their profound connections with their teachers, the supportive learning environment, and the emotional safety they experienced. It is evident that students felt a strong sense of belonging and inclusion within the school, which played a pivotal role in creating a positive academic learning experience, as they consistently showed up as their authentic selves. In this study, participants expressed a sense of acceptance in the school environment, which was fostered by the teachers, staff, and principal. The presence of pre-existing relationships from elementary and middle school also contributed to a supportive atmosphere within the school's brick and mortar walls. Surprisingly, the issue of bullying related to these pre-existing relationships was not prominent, as participants shared that it was limited to a select few individuals. The positive school climate, supportive teachers, and conducive learning environment described by the participants may provide insights into how to foster and development this school environment. Overall, the data highlighted the caring and supportive attitudes of teachers, which played a significant role in fostering students' sense of belonging. These findings suggest that the positive relationships between teachers and students contribute to a supportive school climate, thereby enhancing equity in the school environment by feeling accepted (Gorski, 2016; Young, 2014).

Educational equity emerged from the study through the influence of the student-teacher relationship on participants' motivation to attend school. The motivation to attend school was influenced by the participants' connection to their teachers and the fear of disappointing them. In the study, one participant stated, "*If it wasn't for my teachers cheerleading me on, it wouldn't be the same, they make it feel like we all belong," and "[teachers], it's kinda the reason I keep showing up*" (individual interview, Astro). In secondary school, teachers often serve as role

models and are perceived not only as instructors but also as mentors to students (Tuters, 2015). Strong student-teacher relationships have been consistently highlighted in the literature for their significant impact on students' social, academic, and emotional growth (Jimerson & Haddock, 2015). Students who have such strong relationships with their teachers are more likely to be motivated to actively engage in the curriculum, increasing their chances of academic success. The participants in this study expressed their respect for their teachers, which in turn contributed to their motivation to consistently strive for excellence in their work.

The positive school climate may be attributed to their proximity and frequent encounters outside the classroom, as reported by participants. The opportunity to see their teachers in various community settings can strengthen relationships, particularly when those interactions are positive (Delpit, 2006). Delpit (2006) further elucidates that community connections add depth and richness to student-teacher relationships.

> It is often very difficult for teachers, particularly those who may not be from the same cultural or class background as the children, to understand where strengths may lie. We must have means to discover what the children are able to do outside of school—in church, at community centers, as caretakers for younger siblings—or what skills they may be able to display on the playground with their peers. (p. 12)

For youth living in small communities, the proximity and frequent exposure to their teachers is very common (Piché et al., 2015). The issue of multiple relationships in small and rural communities is often perceived as conflicts of interest (Piché et al., 2015). However, in the present study it was not. One participant spoke about providing childcare to one of the teachers' children. This youth expressed her gratitude towards her teacher for entrusting her with his children. The respect she had for him and his family, and the trust he and his family had in her, contributed to her engagement and commitment to school. This finding provides evidence contrary to the prevailing assumptions in the literature, which suggests multiple relationships

inherently transpires into conflicts of interest. In this example, connection and respect were reciprocated through an informal relationship, which translated into the classroom in the form of increased engagement and commitment.

The last aspect of creating equity is regarding the atmosphere of a school that fosters diversity. Diversity is actively nurtured within this school, cultivating an inclusive climate where everyone feels welcome. The study findings corroborate the literature on school climate, highlighting the positive perception of the principal, teachers, and staff. Numerous examples demonstrate the school's commitment to fostering diversity and promoting a positive atmosphere for all individuals. Notably, there is an Indigenous culture room accessible to anyone, where participants expressed that smudging and other ceremonies can be practiced. Furthermore, the school cultivates a supportive environment for individuals who identify as 2SLGBTQIA+. Pronouns are respected and valued, contributing to a sense of non-judgment as reported by the participants. Tuters (2015) underscored the pivotal role teachers' play in shaping the overall atmosphere of a school and their influence on students' sense of acceptance or rejection. Teachers often serve as the first observers of oppression, discrimination, and inequities (Gorski, 2016). Tuters' (2015) study revealed that the failure to acknowledge and embrace diversity by teachers contributed to a negative school climate. Similarly, Wimmer et al.'s (2008) empirical research on school climate in a secondary school in Saskatchewan highlighted how teachers' inaction in response to bullying perpetuated a toxic environment. The present study's findings align with the existing body of literature on school climate, emphasizing that teachers not only educate students but also hold the power to interrupt or perpetuate injustices as gatekeepers (Freire, 1970/2008; Young, 2014).

Flexible Approach to Learning

In this section, we will delve into how a flexible approach to learning can help create equity through flexibility in academia for geographically isolated students. The basis for this argument stems directly from the lived experiences shared by the participants, who expressed their appreciation for personalized learning opportunities during the pandemic. They described how their teachers adapted their teaching methods to cater to their individual learning needs while still adhering to the curriculum. Given the significant disruptions to learning reported by the participants in this study, it is understandable that the youth expressed a deep appreciation for the subtle adaptations made by their teachers to support their education. These adaptations included flexible assignments, booklets, and independent studies, which were mentioned as helpful in keeping the participants engaged in the material. As Jay expressed, *"If it wasn't for the flexible assignments, I don't think I could have graduated. The amount of school I missed because of the pandemic and all the other stuff like bus issues, it would be impossible to catch up* (individual interview, Jay)". The accidental modifications to curriculum have resulted in Astro staying engaged in school *"I told my teacher about the Northwestern Ontario bird study I did during the pandemic, and he came up with an assignment that counted towards my marks".*

The role of flexible learning approaches enhancing motivation in pedagogy supports existing literature on placed-base curricula (Reid, 2017; Vinson et al., 2015). In a study conducted by de Klerk and Palmer (2021), five rural principals were interviewed to gain insight into how they established an equitable learning environment through adaptation during the pandemic. The principals emphasized their commitment to fostering inclusive learning cultures and promoting flexible learning while ensuring care for their students. Their strategies included: 1) creating inclusive opportunities for students to participate in teaching and learning activities,

2) providing learning materials to ensure inclusion, 3) delivering motivational pamphlets to meet students' psycho-social needs, 4) engaging with parents through an app to monitor students' behavior at home and communicate with teachers, and 5) offering technological training to teachers. Although the principals expressed their commitment to equitable learning outcomes, it remains unclear whether the students felt the same way. However, this study adds valuable insights from the perspectives of the youth themselves, as they articulated both the strengths and limitations of online learning and e-learning through an adapted curriculum necessitated by the pandemic.

Some of the participants expressed a strong desire for personalized education that would allow them to focus on areas where they excelled, such as baking. They felt that the current curriculum lacked the flexibility to accommodate their interests and passions. One participant, who aspired to become a pastry chef, lamented the absence of bakeshops in their community, which hindered their ability to pursue their passion and develop their skills. This lack of opportunity was perceived as a setback in their educational journey (Bell, 2016). On the other hand, another participant wished for a standardized curriculum across the province, as they believed that the variations in curricula between different streams (academic, applied, and locally developed) created learning setbacks for them. These two viewpoints reflect ongoing dilemmas discussed in pedagogy literature (Kokotsaki et al., 2016; Tan, 2021), and they raise questions about the role of secondary schooling in the broader continuum of education (Jimerson & Haddock, 2015). It is important to note that while grade nine streaming has been eliminated in Ontario schools, streaming still persists in grade 10 (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, November 11, 2021), further emphasizing the need to address these challenges and ensure equitable educational opportunities for all students.

Another important point that the study revealed is that virtual learning can support the educational gap existing in northern, rural schools, but is not the key solution. Participant experiences added to our current understanding of equitable access to education with e-learning (de Klerk, & Palmer, 2021). During the pandemic, secondary schools in Ontario provided the majority of education through virtual learning (Holt-Lunstad, 2021). Youth in this study spoke about how there were inconsistencies in online and virtual learning, as some teachers did it with fervour, and others did not. Internet access and assumption of technology knowledge were also barriers to the success of a virtual learning platform. Further, when students returned to face-to-face learning, a lot of the virtual learning continued to supplement the learning of those who were sick and couldn't come to school. However, participants stated that some teachers logged on their virtual classroom and others did not, which interrupted their learning.

The study brought forth issues with internet access and an inconsistent commitment to virtual classes on the part of teachers. There is currently a lack of physical infrastructure to provide high-speed internet to northern and remote communities (Haynes, 2022). Students also experience socioeconomic barriers that may make it difficult to attend virtually even when the infrastructure is present; demographic data on northern rural communities consistently reveal high poverty rates (Corbett, 2014). One participant spoke about not having access to a computer at home, while another was experiencing homelessness, both of which are crucial components to virtual learning. This is consistent with other research that Gleason and Berg (2020) conducted as they discovered that the pandemic revealed injustices that otherwise would continue to be hidden. Therefore, while it seems like a plausible solution to create equity through virtual access to education to make it accessible when weather, bussing, and travel issues would otherwise interfere, the system needs improvement. Teachers must be consistent in their delivery of virtual

synchronous learning and the current structural and socioeconomic barriers must be mitigated through investment in broadband and equipment for all students.

Despite the known barriers to virtual classrooms, one youth envisioned the ideal virtual/in-person hybrid solution. This youth suggested creating a virtual reality classroom where two-way cameras, microphones and speakers are set up at the desks of absent students to provide an immersive learning experience from home. A brilliant idea that may come to fruition in the future, however presently it seems out of reach due to a number of factors. The most obvious being the financial investment required to secure hardware, software, and training. Considering government emphasis on fiscal restraint (Council for Canadian Academies, 2021), the consolidation of schools (Looker & Bollman, 2020), and stagnating teacher wages (Adamson et al., 2016)—let alone the financial investment teachers are required to make to simply fit their classrooms with basic educational supplies—it is unlikely any current government would invest in this solution. Notwithstanding the present financial constraints, this recommendation is a manifestation of the growing consciousness that these youth have towards their education. The youth perspectives and ideas presented in this paper are informed by their experiences and a genuine desire to improve their educational opportunities and are therefore worthy of contribution to the landscape of educational reform for northern, rural schools.

An unexpected area for investigation into addressing equity in education arose due to the recent pandemic restrictions. Youth shared a lot about how the pandemic forced them to learn outside of the box. The school closure resulted in youth being further isolated, in an isolated community. However, they found themselves going outdoors and finding snippets of learning in the solitude of nature. They discovered gratitude for what they did have, and developed mindfulness skills that have contributed to their wellbeing. This contributes to the argument for

the decentralization of education where a continuum of curriculum can be created to reflect the local and individual needs of youth. Further, it has been argued that the traditional authoritarian approach to education inhibits youths' creativity and agency (Freire, 1994). While traditional education advocates may argue that impromptu curriculum development and implementation risks the integrity of education, this study demonstrated that it enhanced the motivation to learn and be engaged. It is clear, however, that more research is needed before a swift shift in pedagogy, like impromptu curriculum development and place-based curriculum occurs.

What are the spatial, educational, and socio-cultural obstacles encountered in northern, rural secondary education?

Contextual Obstacles to Learning

Youth living in northern rural contexts experience spatial, educational, and socio-cultural barriers to their education. Participants in this study faced various contextual obstacles that hindered their learning experiences. The spatial obstacles were primarily influenced by their geographic location, characterized by the challenges associated with the northern climate, the need for bus transportation, and the travel requirements for health care. The educational obstacles were the lack of curriculum relevancy, limited educational opportunities, and limited equipment. Finally, the socio-cultural barriers were the compounding effects of mental health issues and grief. These factors had a significant impact on their ability to engage in face-to-face learning. External factors such as adverse weather conditions and travel challenges frequently contributed to their difficulties in attending school. Additionally, internal factors, including anxiety, mood fluctuations, and low motivation, also played a role in their absences. The

combined effect of these external and internal barriers further hindered their access to education, creating significant obstacles to their learning journey.

The difficulties in accessing school in this study aligned with existing literature on rural education. Previous studies examining perceived educational barriers in rural contexts have explored the interplay of contextual and social constraints on youth (Hango et al., 2021; Irvin et al., 2012; Walker, 2019). For example, a study conducted by Irvin et al. (2012), which involved 7,000 rural youth in grades 9 to 12, the researchers examined the relationship between individual and contextual factors and the perceived educational barriers faced by rural youth in pursuing post-secondary education. Notably, the study found that individuals from racial minority backgrounds experienced more barriers compared to white rural youth, while those living in poverty encountered the greatest number of barriers (Irvin et al., 2012). The present study expands on the existing research by providing in-depth insights into the educational experiences of northern, rural youth, some of whom identified as a racial minority and without a home. By shedding light on the daily hurdles, they face in accessing education and the significant mental and physical efforts required to go to school, this study offers a fuller understanding of their educational journeys. The daily challenges were the transportation, weather conditions, mental health fluctuating, personal issues, and motivation. Furthermore, the lack of accessible and sufficient local health and dental care resulted in some participants missing significant amounts of school due to the need for healthcare-related travel. Additionally, the recent loss of young community members further impacted their ability to concentrate and attend school. These experiences directly contributed to the multitude of challenges faced by the participants in this study regarding their education.

The study shed light on the issue of frequent absences resulting from transportation challenges faced by northern, rural youth. These challenges ranged from weather-related disruptions to systemic issues like bus driver shortages. The compounded effects of inadequate transportation infrastructure and the harsh northern climate raise concerns about the accessibility of education for these youth. The literature review explores issues of equity that influence major public sectors in the North, including education and healthcare (Looker & Bollman, 2020). Decisions and policies are predominantly formulated by urban stakeholders, often ignoring the unique needs of rural communities (Fulkerson & Thomas, 2013; Nazariadli, 2018; Nazariadli et al., 2019; Thier & Beach, 2019). This is a form of oppression as Young (2014) states that cultural imperialism involves the dominant group's imposition of its cultural norms, values, and practices on subordinate groups. It suppresses the cultural expressions, languages, and identities of marginalized communities, such as northern rural communities, reinforcing their subordination and erasing their unique perspectives. To truly reconcile with Indigenous Peoples, educational sectors of the government must address the rural and Indigeneity interface where Indigenous Sovereignty is the focus (RedCorn et al., 2022).

Despite some attempts to include local voices in decision-making processes during the pandemic (Crooks et al., 2022), the centralized education system in Ontario operates under the assumption of equal opportunities for all residents, regardless of their geographical location (Agbo, 2006). While the Education Equity Action Plan and Ontario Rural Education strategies are designed to tackle inequities within the school system (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2017a, 2017b), it is important to recognize that policies alone cannot guarantee substantial action or tangible results, as indicated by the existing literature.

Through the review of literature, an important concern emerged, which prompted this research: the tendency by school boards to overlook geographic location and isolation as equity considerations in educational policy, despite their freedom to contextualize policies (Mayor & Duarez, 2019). This study contributes to the ongoing discourse on equity by providing concrete examples of how youth are directly impacted by the absence of such considerations. The prevalence of transportation issues, weather challenges, and the need to travel for basic services has been normalized in northern, rural communities, with youth often accepting these circumstances without critical examination. Meit (2018) further argued that the lack of precedence in including rurality as a target for equity policies hinders the possibility of receiving financial support from the government. Thus, unless rural school boards take the lead in advocating for the inclusion of rurality as an educational policy target and subsequent goals (Rezai-Rashti et al., 2020), the status quo will persist (Nicholls, 2020). This research addresses the gap in understanding by providing rich contextual information on how isolation and geographic location significantly impact the learning experiences of northern, rural youth.

The present study sheds light on the contrasting nature of transportation in relation to education. On one hand, school buses play a crucial role in making education accessible. However, the reliance on school buses on the other hand also becomes a barrier when various factors such as severe weather conditions, bus driver shortages, or winter road conditions disrupt their regular operation. An unexpected finding, yet understandable, was the extent of travel required for youth to access essential medical and dental care, which in turn significantly affects their attendance. The data from this study provides valuable context regarding the travel involved in seeking specialist treatment and dental procedures that are not available through telehealth or the community's healthcare facilities (Jong et al., 2019). As highlighted by Martin et al. (2018),

> Canadians living in remote areas must often travel long distances to access anything beyond the most basic forms of health care. For example, in Nunavut, a northern and largely Indigenous territory, 58% of patients needing inpatient and outpatient hospital care are transported outside the territory. (p.1724)

The impact of having to travel an average of 350 kilometres, and in some cases up to 1500 kilometres, to receive necessary medical care is not unique to youth. However, the specific impact on their academic learning is significant. This perspective aligns with the existing body of literature on accessing healthcare in northern and rural communities in Canada (Martin et al., 2018). The disruption to education leads to youth falling behind in their lessons, creating a constant struggle to catch up on missed material while simultaneously keeping up with current coursework.

Transportation issues that arose in this study represents an example of classic "wicked" policy problems (Rittel & Webber, 1973). The following issues contribute to this problem: long distances travel to get to school; roads do not get cleared as frequently as in urban centres resulting in more bus cancellations due to road conditions (A. Mcfarlane, personal communication, April 8, 2022); bus driver shortages have become a major human resources issue as the bus company contracted to transport the selected school's students is competing for drivers with the recently developed local gold mine (A. McFarlane, personal communication, April 8, 2022); a lack of reliable information system for students to know when buses are cancelled; and, a rigid busing system that fails many students. Wicked problems are not solved through traditional data-driven technical-rational processes (Banack & Pohler, 2023). Rather, these problems are addressed when communities come together with radically different ideas to create collective problem solving (Banack & Pohler, 2023; Rittel & Webber, 1973). An example

of creative problem solving is how this study raised consciousness within participants and assisted in reflections of new actions to help find the right solution.

Guided by critical consciousness theory, this research aimed to activate critical reflection on equitable rural education and inspire youth to act on these issues. One form of critical action identified in the focus group was the creation of a working committee focused on transportation within the school, with representatives from each grade and community. The goal was for these student leads to collaborate with the local chief and council or town council to explore alternative transportation options when bus services are disrupted. The youth leads would meet regularly to plan, support, and problem-solve as needed, with the added suggestion that their participation in the committee could count towards their mandatory volunteer hours.

This innovative proposal exemplifies consciousness raising (Freire, 2007) and showcases the active engagement of youth as democratic agents of change (Cammarota 2007/2011; Ginwright & Cammarota, 2007; Freire 1970/2008). The idea of a working committee to help minimize the impact of transportation issues on learning is an important action for change. However, given the high level of engagement demonstrated by both students and teachers, I recommend a working committee and a provincial rural and northern youth engagement strategy, as this would be a call to government based on these findings. The convergence of these findings with the existing literature supporting youth engagement in promoting well-being further strengthens the case for adopting this solution. Furthermore, the existing literature on youth development supports the multitude of benefits associated with youth engagement in decision-making, including enhanced morale, improved connection to the school, and the development of essential skills for their future (Cress et al., 2023; Owens, 2018; Shek et al., 2019).

Participants in this study also drew attention to a significant concern regarding mental health issues within their community, particularly the profound and enduring impact of recent youth suicides on students. Mental health issues were a barrier for school attendance, but it also cast a shadow on their ability to attend or desire to be focused on school. These issues are well documented in the literature. Many studies mark the mental health struggles northern, rural, and remote individuals face across the world (Friesen, 2019; Hunter, 2007; Katapally, 2020). Participants in this study expressed their lack of understanding regarding the underutilization of mental health services by themselves and other students, despite recognizing the need for them. The potential explanation for this phenomenon lies in the stigmatization associated with seeking mental health support in small towns, which inhibits the utilization of available services (Katapally, 2020). Similarly, the existing literature struggles to identify effective strategies for addressing mental health conditions and high suicide rates among school aged youth in northern, rural communities, as evidenced in studies conducted by Biddle and Azano (2016), Peterson et al. (2018), Perry (2009), and Philo (1992). Furthermore, additional research should investigate the reasons that mental health services are not utilized in this schooling community.

How does schooling situated within a northern rural and remote context influence youth development?

Isolation Stunting Youth Development

The schooling provided within a northern rural context exerts influence on youth development, encompassing both positive and negative aspects. In this section, I explore these two dimensions to shed light on the positive ways in which students experience youth

development within this context, while also acknowledging the inherent challenges that impede their growth.

Promoting Youth Development

Although isolation was negatively perceived as impacting the participants' ability to flourish as youth, there were many examples reflected in the participants' comments of positive youth development that this milieu provides. A noteworthy instance involves a teacher who also entrusts a student with babysitting responsibilities. This mutual trust and respect are palpable, as the teacher willingly opens their home to the student, confident in their character and capabilities. Likewise, the student feels a sense of safety and comfort to enter the teacher's home and care for their most cherished loved ones. The relationship that blossomed within the school has now extended beyond its boundaries, enriching their sense of connection both within and outside of school. This intermingling of their experiences amplifies the profound bond they share, bridging the gap between their academic and personal lives.

Moreover, this study provides compelling evidence of how robust teacher-student relationships can contribute to the cultivation of a strong sense of self (Ibrahim & El Zaatari, 2020). These relationships have the potential to compensate for deficiencies in other areas, including those within the students' home environments. According to Ibrahim and El Zaatari (2020), the promotion of positive youth development relies on "teachers serving as role models and demonstrating care and compassion towards their students" (p. 384). The findings of the present study underscore the significance of connection, relationships, and positive role models in fostering both positive youth development and academic learning. Further to that, this study highlights the role that a smaller school environment plays in facilitating the formation of robust

teacher-student relationships, which, in turn, can act as a valuable supplement to other relationships that may not be as strong in students' lives.

In geographically isolated areas, smaller schools play a pivotal role as central hubs within small communities, bringing people together (Azano & Biddle, 2019). The *selected school* emphasizes classroom practices and a school climate that promotes youth development and connection (Comber, 2015; Comber & Woods, 2018). As Azano and Biddle (2019) aptly stated, "schools in small communities are not just educational institutions, but they also serve as the heart of the community" (p. 5). These schools go beyond being mere learning environments; they become the primary gathering place for community members (Fullan & Rincon-Gallardo, 2016). The present study provided evidence of this phenomenon, as participants highlighted their motivation for attending school was not only to learn but also to connect with their friends and teachers. In addition, due to the limited extracurricular opportunities in these small communities, the school assumes a significant responsibility as one of the few social environments available to these youth. As such, this school provides much more than just academic learning.

Finally, a compelling aspect of positive youth development is evident through the fostering of emotional safety in the classroom, where students are encouraged to express their emotions freely. In the present study, participants demonstrated the courage to attend school even when experiencing various emotional states, knowing that their teachers would handle and accept their emotions with care. The opportunity for students to continue their education despite feeling emotionally unwell imparts valuable lessons on the power of behavioral activation in overcoming challenging emotional states. This contributes significantly to emotional maturity and overall youth development. Moreover, this highlights the teachers' exceptional support in effectively addressing a wide range of emotional presentations within the school. However, it is

essential to acknowledge and address the impact that supporting multiple emotional states may have on teachers (Goel, 2020), even though their dedication to creating emotional safety and fostering emotional growth in students is evident.

Stunting Youth Development

The isolation was among the most emotionally profound findings that emerged from the study. As demonstrated in the literature review, isolation is detrimental to youth development. Existing literature focuses on social isolation due to bullying and social exclusion (Arslan, 2022; Orben et al., 2020). In northern, rural communities where opportunities for socialization are limited, youth may choose to stay inside instead of connecting with others in communal settings like malls or sports venues. A lack of in-person social networking has shown to have detrimental effects on youth's mental health and social skills (Abi-Jaoude et al., 2020). In an observational study by Twenge et al. (2018), time spent on non-screen activities, such as in-person interactions, sports or exercise, print media, homework, religious services, or working at a paid job, were positively correlated with self-reported happiness, life satisfaction, and self-esteem. The detrimental effects of poor access to in-person socialization are well documented (see Holt-Lunstad, 2021), and should be thoroughly considered by educational leaders and governments to improve well-being in all students.

This research uncovered a general sentiment that living in a small, northern, and rural community is cold and lonely. Metaphorical darkness as a sub theme emerged from the data as the youth shared photos of literal darkness—photos with an absence of light. The dimming of the community's light can be attributed partly to the selected school's location in the moderately northern region of Ontario, which results in longer periods of darkness during the winter months. However, it is important to acknowledge that the community also faces internal challenges that

contribute to this situation. Darkness, isolation, and loneliness are contributing factors to elevated issues with mental health and addictions among northern, rural youth. Therefore, I recommend the installation of full spectrum lighting in all northern schools as lighting matters.

The community's prevailing darkness was attributed to various factors, including the absence of opportunities, isolation, and the ensuing struggles with mental health and addiction. Although the youth did not disclose personal addiction issues, mental health emerged as a recurring topic of conversation. These discussions served as a poignant reminder that high school is already challenging, and the additional layers of geographic, social, economic, and emotional isolation further compound these difficulties. The expectation to endure freezing temperatures of -20°C while waiting for a potentially unreliable bus to access education highlights the stark disparities faced by northern, rural youth compared to their urban counterparts.

The active participation of the participants in this research serves as compelling evidence of their heightened awareness regarding the strengths and barriers they face in education. However, a significant challenge lies in the prevailing urban-normative perspective that dominates positions of power (Nazariadli, 2020). Throughout discussions on educational and social change with the youth involved in this study, I observed a sense of powerlessness in their ability to affect meaningful change within their education system. This sentiment aligns with the principles of critical consciousness theory, and Young (2014) theory on oppression where the elite in power rely on the oppressed accepting their oppression as normal (Freire, 1994). The passivity displayed by the oppressed perpetuates existing power hierarchies and contributes to a 'culture of silence' (Freire, 1994). While I acknowledge that part of the powerlessness I witnessed may be attributed to the exhaustion stemming from the ongoing pandemic, it also reflects the impact of centralized and urban-normative policies within the Ontario education system.

The literature has consistently highlighted isolation as a longstanding issue in northern, rural, and remote communities, emphasizing its profound impact on the residents (Cosgrave et al., 2019; Deziel et al., 2023). In line with these findings, the present study underscored a significant lack of social, recreational, and leisure services within the communities outside of what the school has provided. The youth themselves acknowledged the detrimental role of boredom in the high rates of drug and alcohol use and abuse, yet they expressed limited ideas on how to address these issues effectively. One suggestion put forward by the youth was their participation in the town council, but they felt discouraged due to insufficient funding and policy knowledge, which they believed would hinder their ability to drive meaningful change. To address these challenges, it is imperative to bring about a fundamental shift in prioritizing social determinants of health, including social, recreational, and leisure services, in these communities (Koebisch et al., 2020). Moreover, implementing permanent social and recreational services holds the potential to positively impact mental health, addiction rates, and the recruitment and retention of qualified staff (Koebisch et al., 2020; Owens, 2018). The youth expressed a strong desire for changes in social, recreational, and leisure services in northern, rural schools and communities. However, it is worth noting that while they felt confident in taking a leading role in implementing strategic actions within the school, they exhibited hesitancy in doing the same at the community level. One possible approach to address this hesitation is by establishing the school as a liaison between the youth and the town council, facilitating the expression of youth voices and the implementation of meaningful actions.

While isolation has a detrimental impact on rural education, affecting various aspects of learning outcomes, the participants in this study have highlighted the meaningful aspects of rural living. Therefore, it is unjust for isolation to persist as a factor in the rural education landscape.

However, further research from both school and community perspectives is necessary to address and rectify this inequity.

Implications for Northern, Rural Secondary Schools

The findings of this study have significant implications for policy, practice, and future research in the context of high schools, including northern rural secondary schools and Canada as a whole. While policy implications primarily focus on local-school board-level issues and actions that can be promptly addressed, implications for practice highlight the importance of school-level initiatives to effectively tackle pertinent issues. Furthermore, these implications warrant further exploration in future research endeavors.

The present study indicates that addressing the issue of educational equity in relation to geographical isolation and location primarily hinges on both policy and practical considerations. This coincides with the existing literature that highlights the importance of implementing policies and procedures that promote equitable conditions within northern rural schools to counteract urban-normative biases (Nicholls, 2020). There is a critical necessity for northern rural schools, including the one examined in this research, to develop targeted equity policies and procedures specifically addressing the effects of geographic isolation.

Policy considerations are needed because geographic location and isolation are often overlooked as explicit targets for promoting equity in schools (Corbett, 2014; Lam, 2023). School boards have the autonomy to incorporate diverse indicators of equity into their equity and inclusion frameworks (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2017a). *The school board* of this study did not include geographic isolation and location in their equity and inclusion policy, as it states:

> It is the policy of *the school board* to create and maintain harmonious learning and work environments and equitable outcomes for all students in accordance with the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms and Ontario Human Rights Code. Every student, employee, parent, community member and Trustee has the right to freedom from

> discrimination or harassment because of race, national or ethnic origin, citizenship, colour, religion, marital status, gender, sexual orientation, gender identification, age, ability, or socio-economic status. (p. 1)

Later in the document, they add:

> The Board recognizes that equity of opportunity and equity of access to the full range of programs, the delivery of services, and resources are critical to the achievement of successful educational and social outcomes for those served by the school system as well as those who serve the system. (p. 1)

Based on these findings, it is recommended northern, rural school boards address the impacts of isolation and the barriers posed by the geographic landscape by re-conceptualizing equity policies. This should involve all secondary schools within the school board, articulating geographical isolation and location as specific targets. Furthermore, practical goals should be established that are attainable within the context of these schools, ensuring alignment with the overall objective of promoting educational equity for the youth. Although incorporating geographic location and isolation into policy considerations may present logistical challenges, the youth in this study have provided innovative suggestions for driving change. I recommend an exploration into making a specific amendment to the policy, explicitly stating "geographic location and isolation" as factors to be addressed, given that these youth experience increasing spatial marginality the further they reside. Through the literature review on creating equity (Gorski, 2016), I would recommend adding clear, explicit procedures to attain freedom from marginalization based on location and isolation. It is crucial to develop these procedures collaboratively, ensuring that the input of Northern rural youth is taken into serious consideration.

The practice considerations are for the teachers, the school community, and the principal. The first one is that this study implies that the vital role of teachers in creating equity through

flexible academic learning, interrupting biases, and fostering a sense of belonging is of utmost importance. According to the data, teachers and staff played a pivotal role in promoting equity within northern rural secondary schools. They possessed the potential to make students feel valued, appreciated, and special, all of which are essential for fostering positive youth development. Therefore, I recommend fostering and strengthening this culture of equity and building on the inclusive environment within the school. Also, I recommend a call to action for the governments to implement a provincial rural and northern youth engagement strategy as this would contribute to the commitment of resolving inequities from the perspectives of northern, rural youth.

In recognizing that youth possess the most informed perspectives on the barriers they face, it is essential to take into consideration the novel suggestions provided by these youth. Their voices have shed light on the obstacles they encounter in their learning journeys and the hardships of isolation. Building upon flexible learning approaches within the school, it is proposed to foster a continuous collaborative process involving students, teachers, and staff. This process entails reflecting on contextual school issues and working together to address them. In conscientization theory, this ongoing process of reflection and awareness raising persists until sustainable solutions are achieved (Freire, 2009). Those most affected by the issues are in the best position to create and implement sustainable solutions through critical action (Freire, 2009). It is the students who must drive the momentum for change, rather than relying solely on teachers or staff.

I provide four concrete examples from the voices of the participants that warrant further consideration. First, the idea of a working committee for transportation issues, as discussed by the youth, can be expanded to encompass all school-related matters. Building on this concept, I

propose the establishment of a comprehensive working committee within this school that addresses various issues within the school. It is essential to heed the voices of the youth, allowing them to drive the process of change. Youth are not just passive participants; they possess agency and the potential to bring about meaningful transformations. To facilitate their involvement, I recommend that school principals and teachers in Northern rural schools convene at the beginning of the academic year to discuss the formation of a youth advisory committee for creating equity. This committee would consist of key students representing each grade and town, serving as advisors who bring forth crucial issues. Creating a Northern rural youth advisory committee would effectively highlight the challenges faced by schools in these regions.

Embracing a consciousness-raising model of education within the committee would foster innovative approaches to prevention and intervention. The advisory group would set the agenda, bring forth discussion items, and dedicate research time to gather solutions from their peers. By dismantling bureaucratic barriers, the role of teachers and school staff would primarily involve supporting the group while adhering to school guidelines. Although schools may have limited budgetary power, a teacher could serve as a liaison, providing necessary information and suggesting feasible alternatives. However, the primary objective is to empower the youth by employing critical consciousness as a catalyst for meaningful change, enabling them to address issues that are relevant to their own experiences and aspirations. A future study could then evaluate the effectiveness of a working advisory committee on creating equity.

Second, to help bridge the gap from obstacles to learning, this study offers valuable insights into the effectiveness of place-based and flexible learning approaches, showcasing their advantages. To illustrate this, one youth shared their experience of finding solace and inspiration in the outdoors due to the isolating nature of their surroundings. Their interest in birds, sparked

by this solitude, led them to learn about different bird species and actively seek out these birds in nature, transforming their loneliness into an educational exploration. This example demonstrates the potential intersections of environmental and biological learning that could be integrated into locally developed place-based science education. Therefore, it is essential to thoroughly explore the potential benefits of integrating these innovative teaching practices, specifically within the context of place-based education and the distinctive geographic circumstances of Northern rural communities. As for human resources and staffing concerns, this study helps inform that it is crucial to ensure that teachers from outside the community are well-prepared to understand and embrace the challenges and opportunities of rural settings. They must recognize the importance of flexible learning approaches and cultivate a strong sense of belonging to provide an equitable education for students in rural areas. Therefore, it is crucial to have teachers who are comfortable with flexible learning approaches and virtual learning environments, as they can act as champions within the school community to further promote and enhance these practices. I recommend research into spanning the academic and vocational binary in rural schools – as students were divided about standards based and/or place based curriculum.

Moreover, the suggestion of an onsite garden serves as another example of place-based education. It would involve the collaboration between the community and the school, uniting them in the common goal of promoting food security. Existing literature highlights the pivotal role of schools as the central hub of the community, and the establishment of a community garden would serve to strengthen this connection even further. In addition to fostering a sense of community, an onsite garden could also provide financial support for the school by offering affordable food options. This, in turn, could help address some of the school's needs that are not covered by the budget, creating a mutually beneficial arrangement.

Third, the concept of a real-time virtual classroom presents an intriguing avenue for further exploration. One youth shared their perspective on how an online platform featuring a virtual world, closely aligned with their physical classroom, could offer a richer learning experience for students who face barriers in attending class. This innovative idea proposes a virtual classroom that goes beyond mere video conferencing, resembling a dynamic and interactive environment akin to a video game. It would provide a live experience from a distance, allowing students to virtually participate in classroom activities and mimic their presence within the physical learning space. It is important to emphasize that this virtual classroom would not replace in-person learning but rather serve as a complementary tool. The intention is to leverage the power of technology to enhance accessibility and inclusivity in education, particularly for students facing geographical challenges. By harnessing their imagination and creativity, the youth demonstrate the inherent strengths they possess and their ability to envision alternative learning environments that can overcome barriers. Further investigation into the feasibility and implementation of such a real-time virtual classroom holds promise in expanding educational opportunities and supporting the diverse needs of students in Northern rural communities.

Last, this study emphasized the urgent need for increased social and recreational opportunities in northern and rural schools to address the challenges of isolation. The youth put forward innovative ideas to enhance school morale, including the establishment of an outdoor gym for exercise, a graffiti wall within the school, and an arts and crafts lunch crew. While these initiatives may require funding, it is crucial to revisit the first point raised—the working youth advisory committee. This committee can serve as a platform for student leaders to develop plans based on the insights from this research and their own ideas, addressing the aforementioned challenges and capitalizing on the identified strengths. The working committee would play a

crucial role in facilitating collaboration between the town council, First Nations, and school boards. Through effective communication and coordination, they can ensure that student concerns are transformed into actionable plans. This collaborative effort exemplifies the active development of youth, empowering them to shape their own educational environment and contribute to meaningful change. By embracing the working youth advisory committee as a vehicle for student-led initiatives, the school community can foster a culture of student agency, engagement, and ownership. This holistic approach not only addresses the identified issues but also cultivates a sense of pride, creativity, and well-being among the students. It is through initiatives like these that youth development is truly set into motion, transforming ideas into tangible actions and positive outcomes.

Limitations and Future Directions

I feel it is necessary to point out that the small sample size of this study, even though five participants is within the margins of an interpretative phenomenological analysis study, reduces the generalizability of the results. Through an exploration of northern rural youth perceptions regarding educational equity in their schooling experiences, this study aimed to shed light on the multitude of issues that arise from attending a geographically isolated high school and their impact on education. By recognizing the existing shortcomings in the schooling system and identifying priorities and actionable strategies for improvement, this study takes an important initial step towards effecting meaningful change. The subsequent crucial step involves fostering commitment among school staff, local education officials, parents, community members, and students to actively implement the suggested strategies. Additionally, I recommend a future full-scale study that employs a larger sample and that focuses on promoting ongoing participation

from the school and community in finding solutions to the challenges faced in the high school setting.

Conclusion

This study aimed to gain a comprehensive understanding of the experiences and perceptions of secondary students in a geographically isolated northern rural high school regarding educational equity. It sheds light on the multifaceted impact of spatial, socio-cultural, and physical obstacles of their education while emphasizing how the school's climate and teachers contribute to fostering educational equity and a sense of belonging. The participants openly shared their experiences, revealing the barriers they face in achieving educational success and highlighting the unique advantages of northern rural schooling for youth development. Until now, students had largely accepted their northern rural education without critical examination. Their educational experience is directly impacted by issues such as transportation, quality education, and travel, which are their day-to-day realities. However, these crucial matters are often overshadowed by higher-priority equity concerns within the educational system, including staffing, funding, and infrastructure, thereby neglecting the specific needs of students in these areas.

The outcome of this research highlights that educational equity requires a lot of work. It encompasses various aspects, including a willingness to learn, cooperation, sharing power, finding resources, harnessing creativity and imagination, and adjusting attitudes. I strongly advocate for the inclusion of this newfound knowledge on establishing educational equity in rural teacher preparation modules, as it is of utmost importance to prevent prospective teachers from perpetuating the detrimental inequities prevalent in northern and rural schools. Furthermore, I encourage school boards and educational leaders to integrate these findings into

staff development programs, thus ensuring the sustained advancement of equitable initiatives already in place within schools.

Regarding policies and procedures, I believe that contextualizing educational equity based on the unique needs of each school population is crucial not only for the school involved in this study, but for all schools. Cookie-cutter policies and guidelines alone are insufficient and remain mere words on paper. While teachers and staff play a vital role in creating equity within the school environment, it is equally important to incorporate the voice of youth in the development of equity policies. By involving the youth in shaping policies and practices, the school can enhance their sense of ownership and agency in the pursuit of equitable education. Furthermore, failing to support their holistic equitable educational needs like transportation and limited opportunities to name a few, we risk undermining the quality of their education, which can have lifelong impacts.

Overall, the findings of this research contribute a valuable youth perspective to the ongoing discourse on equity in northern rural education. Establishing equity takes a trifecta of conscientious effort by leadership, teachers and staff, and students. The participants' suggestion on a working advisory committee focusing on creating equity is a critical action that can further amplify their voices and facilitate meaningful change within the school community. Furthermore, this study fills a significant knowledge gap regarding the experiences and perceptions of northern rural youth on equitable education in geographically isolated contexts, which had been largely understudied (Corbett & Gereluk, 2020; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2017a). Without understanding the perspective of northern rural students, assumptions were made about their struggles and the support they require. Assumptions are now unnecessary, as this study provides valuable insights from northern rural students that contribute to the existing

body of knowledge. These insights can inform decision-making by local school boards, enabling them to effectively address learning obstacles and minimize the impact of isolation on students.

Researcher's Note

I am compelled to share that as I wrote the outcomes of my research, I was invited to participate in an anonymous survey from the community within which this study took place. The survey focused on the limited extracurricular opportunities for socialization in the community, and it wanted to know from the public what they needed that would help them feel more connected in the community. I don't know exactly who started this survey, but in my anecdotal research, they are youth who attended the school. The point of this is that we, as student researchers, often underestimate the power of research. I believe that this research has met its objectives.

References

Abi-Jaoude, E., Naylor, K. T., & Pignatiello, A. (2020). Smartphones, social media use and youth mental health. *Cmaj*, *192*(6), E136-E141. https://doi.org/10.1503/cmaj.190434

Acker, S. (2001). In/out/side: Positioning the researcher in feminist qualitative research. *Resources for Feminist Research, 28(*1-2), 189-210. https://www.questia.com/library/journal/

Adams, T. (1917). *Rural planning and development: A study of rural conditions and problems in Canada*. Commission of Conservation Canada. https://ia800708.us.archive.org/view_archive.php?archive=/28/items/crossref-pre-1923-scholarly-works/10.1002%252Fncr.4110040215.zip&file=10.1002%252Fncr.4110070316.pdf

Adamson, P. (2010). The children left behind: A league table of inequality in child wellbeing in the world's rich countries. *Innocenti Report Card*, 9-24. Retrieved from https://www.unicef-irc.org/ publications/619-the-children-left-behind-a-league-table-of-inequality-in-childwell-being-in-the.html

Adamson, F., Astrand, B., & Darling-Hammond, L. (Eds.). (2016). *Global education reform: How privatization and public investment influence education outcomes*. Routledge.

Agbo, S. A. (2001). Enhancing success in American Indian students: Participatory research at Akewesasne as part of the development of a culturally relevant curriculum. *Journal of American Indian Education, 40(*1), 31-56. https://www.jstor.org/stable/24398587

Agbo, S. A. (2003). Changing school-community relations through participatory research: Strategies from First Nations and teachers. *The Canadian Journal of Native Studies, 23*(1), 25-56. https://iportal.usask.ca/docs/ind_art_cjns_v23/cjnsv23no1_pg25-56.pdf

Agbo, S. A. (2006). Changing school-community relations through participatory research: Strategies from First Nations and teachers. In J. A. Winterdyk, L. Coates & S. Brodie (Eds.), *Quantitative and qualitative research methods reader: A Canadian orientation* (pp. 78-98). Pearson.

Agbo, S. A. (2011). Conformity and rationality in Indigenous schooling: The education situation on First Nation reserves. *Interchange 42*(4), 333-362. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10780-012-9163-x

Aguliera, E., & Nightengale-Lee, B. (2020). Emergency remote teaching across urban and rural contexts: Perspectives on educational equity. *Information and Learning Sciences*, *121*(5/6), 471-478. https://doi.org/10.1108/ils-04-2020-0100

Alasia, A., Bédard, F., Bélanger, J., Guimond, E., & Penney. C. (2017). Measuring remoteness and accessibility: A set of indices for Canadian communities. Statistics Canada. http://www5.statcan.gc.ca/olc-cel/olc.action?objId=18-001-X&objType=2&lang=en&limit=0).

Alston, M., & Kent, J. (2009). Generation X-pendable: The social exclusion of rural and remote young people. *Journal of Sociology, 45*(1) 89-107. https://doi.org/10.1177/1440783308099988

Anderson, G. L. (1989). Critical ethnography in education: Origins, current status, and new directions. *Review of Educational Research*, *59*(3), 249-270. https://doi.org/10.3102/003465430590032

Antone, E. M. (2003). The changing face of Aboriginal education in rural and northern Canada. *Education Canada*, *43*(3), 25. https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ673649

Arakal, J.J. (2020). Covid-19 lockdown: Here's why flexible learning is the need of the hour. https://www.indiatoday.in/education-today/featurephilia/story/covid-19-lockdownhere-s-why-flexible-learning-is-the-need-of-the-hour-1690143-2020-06-18

Ardoin, N. M., Bowers, A. W., Kannan, A., & O'Connor, K. (2022). Positive youth development outcomes and environmental education: A review of research. *International Journal of Adolescence and Youth*, *27*(1), 475–492. https://doi.org/10.1080/02673843.2022.2147442

Arnold, M. E., & Gagnon, R. J. (2020). Positive youth development theory in practice: An update on the 4-H thriving model. *Journal of Youth Development*, *15*(6), 1-23. https://doi.org/10.5195/jyd.2020.954

Arnold, M. L., Newman, J. H., Gaddy, B. B., & Dean, C. B. (2005). A look at the condition of rural education research: Setting a direction for future research. *Journal of Research in Rural Education*, *20*(6), 1-25. https://doi.org/10.4018/978-1-5225-6341-9.ch001

Arslan, G. (2022). School bullying and youth internalizing and externalizing behaviors: Do school belonging and school achievement matter? *International Journal of Mental Health and Addiction*, *20*(4), 2460-2477. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11469-021-00526-x

Asakereh, A., & Weisi, H. (2018). Raising critical consciousness in teaching reading skills using critical pedagogy principles: A case of an Iranian school graduate. *Journal for Critical Education Policy Studies*, *16*(1), 261-291. http://www.jceps.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/16-1-9.pdf

Atkinson, S., Fuller, S., & Painter, J. (2016). Wellbeing and Place. In S. Atkinson, S. Fuller & J. Painter (Eds.), *Wellbeing and Place* (3rd ed., pp.1-14). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315547534

Azano, A. P. (2014). Rural: The other neglected" R": Making space for place in school libraries. *Knowledge Quest, 43*(1), 60-74.

https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A384341054/AONE?u=anon~ebcb0498&sid=googleScholar&xid=01285eaf

Azano, A. P., & Stewart, T. T. (2016). Confronting challenges at the intersection of rurality, place, and teacher preparation: Improving efforts in teacher education to staff rural schools. *Global Education Review, 3(*1), 108-128. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1090174.pdf

Azano, A. P., & Biddle, C. (2019). Disrupting dichotomous traps and rethinking problem formation for rural education. *The Rural Educator, 40(*2), 4-11. https://doi.org/10.35608/ruraled.v40i2.845

Banack, C., & Pohler, D. (Eds.). (2023). *Building Inclusive Communities in Rural Canada*. University of Alberta.

Barbour, M. K. (2014). A history of international K-12 online and blended instruction. In R. Ferdig & K. Kennedy (Eds.), Handbook of Research on K-12 Online and Blended Learning (pp. 25-50). Pittsburgh, PA: Entertainment Technology Center Press, Carnegie Mellon University.

Barrett, J. R. (2007). The researcher as instrument: Learning to conduct qualitative research through analyzing and interpreting a choral rehearsal. *Music Education Research*, *9*(3), 417-433. https://doi.org/10.1080/14613800701587795

Barter, B. (2013). Rural schools and technology: Connecting for innovation. *Australian and International Journal of Rural Education, 23*(3), 46-62. https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1061531

Basu, R. (2004). The rationalization of neoliberalism in Ontario's public education system, 1995–2000. *Geoforum, 35(*5), 621-634. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2004.03.003

Benner, P. E., & Wrubel, J. (1989). *The primacy of caring: Stress and coping in health and illness*. Addison-Wesley/Addison Wesley Longman.

Berman, J. (2013). Utility of a conceptual framework within doctoral study: A researcher's reflections. *Issues in Educational Research*, *23*(1), 1-18. https://doi.10.3316/informit.356179062206358

Bhatnagar, N., & Das, A. (2014). Regular school teachers' concerns and perceived barriers to implement inclusive education in New Delhi, India. *International Journal of Instruction*, *7*(2), 89-102. https://doi.org/10.5206/eei.v24i2.7712

Bialystok, L., Norris, T., & Pinto, L. E. (2019). Teaching and learning philosophy in Ontario high schools. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, *51*(5), 678-697. https://doi.org/10.1080/00220272.2018.1563632

Biddle, C., & Azano, A. P. (2016). Constructing and reconstructing the "rural school problem" a century of rural education research. *Review of Research in Education*, *40*(1), 298-325. https://doi.org/10.3102/0091732x16667700

Bishop, A. (2015). *Becoming an ally: Breaking the cycle of oppression in people* (3rd edition). Fernwood Publishing.

Bleau, D. D. (2022). Anti-oppressive practice in rural/small Indigenous communities: An intersectional and trauma-informed approach to decolonial Praxis. *Rural and Northern Social Work Practice Canadian Perspectives*. https://opentextbooks.uregina.ca/ruralandnorthernsocialworkpractice/chapter/5-anti-oppressive-practice-in-rural-small-indigenous-communities-an-intersectional-and-trauma-informed-approach-to-decolonial-praxis/

Blitz, L. V., Yull, D., & Clauhs, M. (2020). Bringing sanctuary to school: Assessing school climate as a foundation for culturally responsive trauma-informed approaches for urban schools. *Urban Education*, *55*(1), 95-124. https://doi.org/10.1177/0042085916651323

Bokser, J. A. (2005). Pedagogies of belonging: Listening to students and peers. *The Writing Center Journal*, *25*(1), 43-60. https://www.jstor.org/stable/43442210

Bollman, R. D., & Reimer, D. (2018). The dimensions of rurality: Implications for classifying inhabitants as 'rural', implications for rural policy and implications for rural indicators. International Conference of Agricultural Economists. https://ageconsearch.umn.edu/record/277251/files/1467.pdf

Bouchamma, Y., & Lapointe, C. (2008). Success in writing and attributions of 16-year- old French-speaking students in minority and majority environments. *Alberta Journal of Educational Research, 54*(2), 194–209. https://journalhosting.ucalgary.ca/index.php/ajer/article/view/55222

Boyd, D. (2011). No taps, no toilets: First Nations and the constitutional right to water in Canada. *McGill Law Journal/Revue de droit de McGill*, *57*(1), 81-134. https://doi.org/10.7202/1006419ar

Boyd, J., & McShane, I. (2021). The 'difficult balance between equity and differentiation': Developing a transformative praxis. *Journal of the Australian Library and Information Association*, *70*(1), 3-20. https://doi.org/10.1080/24750158.2021.1880357

Brake, L. R., Schleien, S. J., Miller, K. D., & Walton, G. (2012). Photovoice: A tour through the camera lens of self-advocates. *Social Advocacy and Systems Change Journal*, 3(1), 44-53. https://doi.org/10.1080/11745398.2013.828364

Brook, J., Hobbs, N., Neumann-Fuhr, D., O'Riordan, A., Paterson, M., & Johnston, J. (2015). Preparing students in professional programs for rural practice: A case study. *Canadian*

Journal of Higher Education, 45(2), 23-40. http://journals.sfu.ca/cjhe/index.php/cjhe/article/view/184331

Brooks-Gunn, J., & Rotheram-Borus, M. J. (1994). Rights to privacy in research: Adolescents versus parents. *Ethics & Behavior*, *4*(2), 109-121. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327019eb0402_4

Brunsden, V., & Goatcher, J. (2007). Reconfiguring photovoice for psychological research. *The Irish Journal of Psychology, 28*(1-2), 43-52. https://doi:10.1080/03033910.2007.10446247

Brunsden, V., & Hill, R. (2009). Firefighters' experience of strike: An interpretative phenomenological analysis case study. *The Irish Journal of Psychology*, *30*(1-2), 99-115. https://doi.org/10.1080/03033910.2009.10446301

Budge, K. (2006). Rural leaders, rural places: Problem, privilege, and possibility. *Journal of Research in Rural Education*, *21*(13), 1-10. Retrieved from http://jrre.psu.edu/articles/21-13.pdf

Buffone, P. (2022). The cultivation of systemness for enhanced equity, diversity and inclusivity at a mid-sized district school board in the Province of Ontario. *The Organizational Improvement Plan at Western University*. https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/oip/306

Burkhard, B. M., Robinson, K. M., Murray, E. D., & Lerner, R. M. (2019). Positive youth development: Theory and perspective. In S. Hupp, J. D. Jewell, P. Leman, & A. James (Eds.), Encyclopedia of child and adolescent development (pp. 1-12). Wiley-Blackwell. https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119171492.wecad310

Campbell, C. (2021). Educational equity in Canada: The case of Ontario's strategies and actions to advance excellence and equity for students. *School Leadership & Management, 41*(4-5), 409-428. https://doi.org/10.1080/13632434.2019.1709165

Cammarota, J. (2007). A social justice approach to achievement: Guiding Latina/o students toward educational attainment with a challenging, socially relevant curriculum. *Equity and Excellence in Education*, *40*(1)*,* 87–96. https://doi.org/10.1080/10665680601015153

Cammarota, J. (2011). From hopelessness to hope: Social justice pedagogy in urban education and youth development. *Urban Education*, *46*(4), 828-844. https://doi.org/10.1177/0042085911399931

Cammarota, J. (2016). The praxis of ethnic studies: Transforming second sight into critical consciousness. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, *19*(2), 233-251. https://doi.org/10.1080/13613324.2015.1041486

Carlson, E. D., Engebretson, J., & Chamberlain, R. M. (2006). Photovoice as a social process of critical consciousness. *Qualitative Health Research*, *16*(6), 836–852. https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732306287525

Cartwright, F., & Allen, M. K. (2002). Understanding the rural-urban reading gap. Education, skills and learning research papers. *Statistics Canada*, 1-75.

Choi, K. M., VanVoorhis, R. W., & Ellenwood, A. E. (2015). Enhancing critical consciousness through a cross-cultural immersion experience in South Africa. *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development*, *43*(4), 244-261. https://doi.org/10.1002/jmcd.12019

Collier, K. (2006). *Social work with rural peoples* (3rd ed.). New Star Books.

Comber, B. (2015). Critical literacy and social justice. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, *58*(5), 362-367. https://doi.org/10.1002/jaal.370

Comber, B., & Woods, A. (2018). Pedagogies of belonging in literacy classrooms and beyond: What's holding us back? *Interrogating Belonging for Young People in Schools*, 263-281. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-75217-4_13

Corbett, M. (2007). Travels in space and place: Identity and rural schooling. *Canadian Journal of Education, 30*(3), 771-792. ttps://doi.org/10.2307/20466662

Corbett, M. (2014a). Toward a geography of rural education in Canada. *Canadian Journal of Education, 37*(3), 1-22. https://www.jstor.org/stable/canajeducrevucan.37.3.08

Corbett, M. (2014b). The ambivalence of community: A critical analysis of rural education's oldest trope. *Peabody Journal of Education, 89*(5), 603–618. https://doi.org/10.1080/0161956X.2014.956532

Corbett, M. (2015). Rural education: Some sociological provocations for the field. *Australian and International Journal of Rural Education*, *25*(3), 9-25. https://doi.org/10.47381/aijre.v25i3.100

Corbett, M. (2016). Rural futures: Development, aspirations, mobilities, place, and education. *Peabody Journal of Education, 91*(2), 270-282. https://doi.org/10.1080/0161956x.2016.1151750

Corbett, M. (2020). Place-based education: A critical appraisal from a rural perspective. In M. Corbett & D. Gereluk (Eds.), *Rural Teacher Education* (pp. 279-298). Springer.

Corbett, M. (2021). Rural schools and communities: We can bond but can we bridge? In A. P. Azano, K. Eppley, & C. Biddle (Eds.), *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Rural Education in the United States* (pp. 165–172). Bloomsbury Publishing.

Corbett, M., & Gereluk, D. (2020). Introduction: Why rural matters in Canadian education. In M. Corbett & D. Gereluk (Eds.), *Rural Teacher Education* (pp. 3-17). Springer.

Corbett, M., & Helmer, L. (2017). Contested geographies: Competing constructions of community and efficiency in small school debates. *Geographical Research*, *55*(1), 47-57. https://doi.org/10.1111/1745-5871.12209

Cosgrave C, Malatzky C, Gillespie J. (2019). Social determinants of rural health workforce retention: A scoping review. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health. 16*(3):314-228. https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph16030314

Council for Canadian Academies (2021). Health data sharing. Council for Canadian Academies. https://cca-reports.ca/reports/health-data-sharing-in-canada/

Cress, C. M., Collier, P. J., & Reitenauer, V. L. (2023). *Learning through serving: A student guidebook for service-learning and civic engagement across academic disciplines and cultural communities*. Taylor & Francis.

Creswell, J. W. (2014). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches (4th ed.)*. Sage Publications.

Creswell, J. W., & Miller, D. L. (2010). Determining validity in qualitative inquiry. *Theory Into Practice*, *39*(3), 124-130. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15430421tip3903_2

Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2016). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches*. Sage publications.

Croft, M., & Moore, R. (2019). *Rural students: Technology, coursework, and extracurricular activities.* Insights in Education and Work. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED596140.pdf

Crooks, K., Taylor, K., Law, C., Campbell, S., & Miller, A. (2022). Engage, understand, listen and act: Evaluation of Community Panels to privilege First Nations voices in pandemic planning and response in Australia. *BMJ Global Health*, *7*(8), https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjgh-2022-009114

Crumb, L., Chambers, C., Azano, A., Hands, A., Cuthrell, K., & Avent, M. (2023). Rural cultural wealth: Dismantling deficit ideologies of rurality. *Journal for Multicultural Education*, *17*(2), 125-138. https://doi.org/10.1108/JME-06-2022-0076

Cuban, L. (2010). *As good as it gets: What school reform brought to Austin*. Harvard University Press.

Czerniewicz, L., Agherdien, N., Badenhorst, J., Belluigi, D., Chambers, T., Chili, M., De Villiers, M., Felix, A., Gachago, D., Gokhale, C., Ivala, E., Kramm, N., Madiba, M., Mistri, G., Mgqwashu, E., Pallitt, N., Prinsloo, P., Solomon, K., Strydom, S., Swanepoel, M., Waghid, F. & Wissing, G. (2020). A wake-up call: Equity, inequality and Covid-19 emergency remote teaching and learning. *Postdigital Science and Education, 2*, 946–967. https://doi.org/10.1007/ s42438-020-00187-4

Darder, R. D. Torres, & M. P. Baltodano. (2017). Critical pedagogy: An introduction. In A. Darder, R. D. Torres, & M. P. Baltodano (Eds.), *The Critical Pedagogy Reader* (3rd ed., pp. 1-23). Taylor and Francis.

Darling-Hammond, L., & Podolsky, A. (2019). Breaking the cycle of teacher shortages: What kind of policies can make a difference? *Education Policy Analysis Archives, 27*(34), 1-16. https://doi.org/10.14507/epaa.27.4633

de los Ríos, C. V. (2017). Picturing ethnic studies: Photovoice and youth literacies of social action. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, *61*(1), 15-24. https://doi.org/10.1002/jaal.631

Desmarais, A. A., & Wittman, H. (2014). Farmers, foodies and First Nations: Getting to food sovereignty in Canada. *Journal of Peasant Studies*, *41*(6), 1153-1173. https://doi.org/10.1080/03066150.2013.876623

Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (Eds.). (1994). *Handbook of qualitative research.* Sage Publications.

Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (Eds.). (1998). *The landscape of qualitative research: Theories and issues*. Sage Publications.

Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (2008). Introduction: The discipline and practice of qualitative research. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Strategies of qualitative inquiry* (pp. 1–43). Sage Publications.

Deziel, N. C., Warren, J. L., Bravo, M. A., Macalintal, F., Kimbro, R. T., & Bell, M. L. (2023). Assessing community-level exposure to social vulnerability and isolation: Spatial patterning and urban-rural differences. *Journal of Exposure Science & Environmental Epidemiology*, *33*(2), 198-206. https://doi.org/10.1038/s41370-022-00435-8

Diemer, M. A. (2009). Pathways to occupational attainment among poor youth of color: The role of sociopolitical development. *The Counseling Psychologist, 37*(1), 6–35. https://doi.org/10.1177/0011000007309858

Diemer, M. A., & Li, C.-H. (2011). Critical consciousness development and political participation among marginalized youth. *Child Development, 82*(6), 1815–1833. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8624.2011.01650.x

Diemer, M. A., Pinedo, A., Bañales, J., Mathews, C. J., Frisby, M. B., Harris, E. M., & McAlister, S. (2021). Recentering action in critical consciousness. *Child Development Perspectives*, *15*(1), 12-17. https://doi.org/10.1111/cdep.12393

Diemer, M. A., Rapa, L. J., Voight, A. M., & McWhirter, E. H. (2016). Critical consciousness: A developmental approach to addressing marginalization and oppression. *Child Development Perspectives*, *10*(4), 216-221.https://doi.org/10.1111/cdep.12193

Diemer, M. A., & Rapa, L. J. (2016). Unraveling the complexity of critical consciousness, political efficacy, and political action among marginalized adolescents. *Child Development*, *87*(1), 221-238. https://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.12446

Drago-Severson, E. (2012). New opportunities for principal leadership: Shaping school climates for enhanced teacher development. *Teachers College Record, 114*(3), 1-44. https://doi.org/10.1177/016146811211400305

Dupéré, V., Goulet, M., Archambault, I., Dion, E., Leventhal, T., & Crosnoe, R. (2019). Circumstances preceding dropout among rural high school students: A comparison with urban peers. *Journal of Research in Rural Education, 35*(3), 1-20. https://doi.org/10.26209/ jrre3503

Eaton, S. E., Gereluk, D., Dressler, R., & Becker, S. (2017, April 27-May 1). *A rural education teacher preparation program: Course design, student support and engagement* [Paper presentation]. Annual American Educational Research Association (AERA) Conference, San Anotnia, TX, United States.

Echazarra, A. & Radinger, R. (2019). Learning in rural schools: Insights from PISA, TALIS and the literature. *OECD Education Working Papers*, No. 196, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/8b1a5cb9-en.

Edgerton, J. D., Peter, T., & Roberts, L. W. (2008). Back to the basics: Socio-economic, gender, and regional disparities in Canada's educational system. *Canadian Journal of Education/Revue Canadienne de l'Éducation, 31*(4), 861-888. https://www.jstor.org/stable/20466732

Edington, E. D. (1970). 4: Disadvantaged rural youth. *Review of Educational Research*, *40*(1), 69-85. https://doi.org/10.3102/00346543040001069

El-Amin, A., Seider, S., Graves, D., Tamerat, J., Clark, S., Soutter, M., Johannsen, J., & Malhotra, S. (2017). Critical consciousness: A key to student achievement. *Phi Delta Kappan*, *98*(5), 18–23. https://doi.org/10.1177/0031721717690360

Ellard-Gray, A., Jeffrey, N. K., Choubak, M., & Crann, S. E. (2015). Finding the hidden participant: Solutions for recruiting hidden, hard-to-reach, and vulnerable populations. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods, 14*(5), 1-10. https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406915621420

Fan, L., Brownlee, K., Habibov, N. N., & Neckoway, R. (2017). Returns to education and occupations for Canadian Aboriginal people. *International Journal of Social Economics*, *44*(12), 2224-2237.

Faubert, B., & Paulson, E. (2020). Ontario, Canada: Education in the echo chamber: Understanding K-12 education governance in Ontario, Canada. In H. Arlestig & O. Johansson (Eds.), *Educational authorities and the schools: Organisation and impact in 20 states*, (pp.231-250). Springer

Ferenczy, Z. A. (2021). The EU, North Korea and the shifting global discourse on human rights. In N. Casarani, A. Fiori, N.K. Kim, J-S. Lee, & R. Pacheco Pardo (Eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Europe-Korea Relations*, (pp.)267-280. Routledge.

Fleguel, J., (2022, November 17). 3 newly-elected city councillors oppose bill that would allow mayor Tory to pass bylaws without a majority. CP24. https://www.cp24.com/news/3-newly-elected-city-councillors-oppose-bill-that-would-allow-mayor-tory-to-pass-bylaws-without-a-majority-1.6157868

Flessa, J., Gallagher-Mackay, K., & Ciufetelli Parker, D. (2010). "Good, steady progress": Success stories from Ontario elementary schools in challenging circumstance. *Canadian Journal of Educational Administration and Policy*, (101), 1-38. https://cjc-rcc.ucalgary.ca/index.php/cjeap/article/view/42791

Freire, P. (1970/2008). *Pedagogy of the oppressed.* Continuum International Publishing Group.

Freire, P. (1974). 'Conscientisation'. *CrossCurrents*, *24*(1), 23-31. https://www.jstor.org/stable/24457877

Freire, P. (1973). *Education for critical consciousness.* The Seabury Press.

Freire, P. (2000). *Pedagogy of the oppressed.* Continuum International Publishing Group.

Friesen, E. (2019). The landscape of mental health services in rural Canada. *University of Toronto Medical Journal*, *96*(2), 47–52. https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip,uid&db=ccm&AN=136698881&site=ehost-live&scope=site.

Fulkerson, G. M., & Thomas, A. R. (2013). Urbanization, urban-normativity, and place-structuration. In M. Fulkerson & A. R. Thomas (Eds.), *Studies in urban-normativity: Rural community in urban society* (pp. 5–30). Lexington Books.

Fultz, M. (1995). African American teachers in the South, 1890–1940: Powerlessness and the ironies of expectations and protest. *History of Education Quarterly*, *35*(4), 401-422. https://doi.org/10.2307/369578

Fulkerson, G. M., & Thomas, A. R. (2016). Reinventing rural revisited. In G. Fulkerson & A. Thomas (Eds.), *Reinventing rural: New realities in an urbanizing world* (pp.215-220). Lexington Books

Fullan, M., & Rincon-Gallardo, S. (2016). Developing high-quality public education in Canada: The case of Ontario. In F. Adamson, B. Astrand, & L. Darling-Hammond, *Global education reform* (pp. 169-193). Routledge.

Galway, L. P. & Beery, T. (2022). Exploring climate emotions in Canada's provincial North. *Front Psychol, 13*, 1-10. https://doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2022.920313.

Gay, G. (2010). Acting on beliefs in teacher education for cultural diversity. *Journal of Teacher Education*, *61*(1-2), 143-152. https://doi.org/10.1177/0022487109347320

Gibson, C., & Gordon, A. (2018). Rural cultural resourcefulness: How community music enterprises sustain cultural vitality. *Journal of Rural Studies*, *63*, 259-270. https://doi.org/10.1080/17406315.2018.1507788

Ginwright, S., & Cammarota, J. (2007). Youth activism in the urban community: Learning critical civic praxis within community organizations. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education, 20*(6), 693-710. https://doi.org/10.1080/09518390701630833

Girling, E. (2016). Ethical challenges: Doing research with children. In M. Cowburn, L. Gelstharpe, & A. Wahidin (Eds.), *Research ethics in criminology: Dilemmas, issues and solutions (*pp. 95-121). Routledge.

Giroux, H. A. (2003). Public pedagogy and the politics of resistance: Notes on a critical theory of educational struggle. *Educational Philosophy and Theory, 35*(1), 5-16. https://doi.org/10.1111/1469-5812.00002

Gleason, S. C., & Berg, J. H. (2020). An opportunity for equity: Pandemic shines a light on the need for equitable teaching practices. *The Journal of Staff Development.*, *41*(3), 1-5. https://doi.org/info:doi/

Glesne, C. (2007). Research as solidarity. In N. Denzin & M. Giardina (Eds.), *Ethical futures in qualitative research: Decolonizing the politics of knowledge* (pp.169-178). Routledge.

Godfrey, E. B., & Burson, E. (2018). Interrogating the intersections: How intersectional perspectives can inform developmental scholarship on critical consciousness. *New Directions for Child and Adolescent Development*, *2018*(161), 17-38. https://doi.org/10.1002/cad.20246

Godfrey, E. B., Burson, E. L., Yanisch, T. M., Hughes, D., & Way, N. (2019). A bitter pill to swallow? Patterns of critical consciousness and socioemotional and academic well-being in early adolescence. *Developmental Psychology, 55*(3), 525-537. https://doi.org/10.1037/dev0000558

Goel, M. K. (2020). *Mental health literacies of secondary school teachers in Ontario: A mixed methods study* [Unpublished doctoral dissertation].University of Toronto.

Gorski, P. (2016). Rethinking the role of "culture" in educational equity: From cultural competence to equity literacy. *Multicultural Perspectives, 18*(4), 221-226. https://doi.org/10.1080/15210960.2016.1228344

Gorski, P. C., & Swalwell, K. (2015). Equity literacy for all. *Educational Leadership*, *72*(6), 34-40. https://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/mar15/vol72/n

Gourlay, L., Campbell, K., Clark, L., Crisan, C., Katsapi, E., Riding, K., & Warwick, I. (2021). Engagement discourses, relationality and the student voice: Connectedness, questioning and inclusion in post-Covid digital practices. *Journal of Interactive Media in Education*, *2021*(1), 1-15. http://doi.org/10.5334/jime.655

Government of Canada. (2019, July 16). *High speed access for all: Canada's connectivity strategy.* https://www.ic.gc.ca/eic/site/139.nsf/eng/h_00002.html

Grant, C., & Osanloo, A. (2014). Understanding, selecting, and integrating a theoretical framework in dissertation research: Creating the blueprint for your "house". *Administrative Issues Journal: Connecting Education, Practice, and Research*, 4(2), 12-26. https://doi.org/10.5929/2014.4.2.9.

Greene, S., Burke, K. J., & McKenna, M. K. (2018). A review of research connecting digital storytelling, photovoice, and civic engagement. *Review of Educational Research*, *88*(6), 844–878. https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654318794134

Green, B., & Letts, W. (2007). Space, equity, and rural education: A 'trialectical'account. In K Gulson & C. Symes (Eds.), *Spatial theories of education* (pp. 67-86). Routledge.

Greenough, R., & Nelson, S. R. (2015). Recognizing the variety of rural schools. *Peabody Journal of Education, 90*(2), 322- 332. https://doi.org/10.1080/0161956X.2015.1022393

Greenwood, D. A. (2009). Place, survivance, and white remembrance: A decolonizing challenge to rural education in mobile modernity. *Journal of Research in Rural Education, 24*(10), 1-6. https://jrre.psu.edu/articles/24-10.pdf

Greenwood, M., Lindsay, N., King, J., & Loewen, D. (2017). Ethical spaces and places: Indigenous cultural safety in British Columbia health care. *Alter Native: An International Journal of Indigenous Peoples, 13*(3), 179-189. https://doi.org/10.1177/1177180117714411

Guba, E. G., & Lincoln, Y. S. (1994). Competing paradigms in qualitative research. In E. Guba & Y. Lincoln (Eds). *Handbook of Qualitative Research* (2nd ed., pp.163-194).

Hall, B. L. (1981). Participation research, popular knowledge and power: A personal reflection. *Convergence 3*, 6-19. https://www.proquest.com/openview/821c414d7ca5ea1661d8970d101a18e0/1?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=2030445

Hall Mark, D. L. (2013). Academic achievement gap or gap of opportunities? *Urban Education*, *48*(2), 335–343. https://doi.org/10.1177/0042085913476936

Hango, D., Zarifa, D., Pizarro Milian, R., & Seward, B. (2021). Roots and STEMS? Examining field of study choices among northern and rural youth in Canada. *Studies in Higher Education*, *46*(3), 563-593. https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2019.1643308

Harrington, V., & O'Donoghue, D. (1998). Rurality in England and Wales 1991: A replication and extension of the 1981 rurality index. *Sociologia Ruralis*, *38*(2), 178-203. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9523.00071

Harrison, N., & Skrebneva, I. (2020). Country as pedagogical: Enacting an Australian foundation for culturally responsive pedagogy. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, *52*(1), 15-26. https://doi.org/10.1080/00220272.2019.1641843

Haynes, M. (2022). The impacts of school closure on rural communities in Canada: A review. *The Rural Educator*, *43*(2), 60-74. : https://doi.org/10.55533/2643-9662.1321

Heppner, D. (2017). Writing instruction in Canadian preschool-primary grades: A literature review. *McGill Journal of Education/Revue des sciences de l'éducation de McGill, 52*(2), 335-358. https://mje.mcgill.ca/article/view/9249

Herbert, A. (2020). Contextualising policy enactment in regional, rural and remote Australian schools: A review of the literature. *Australian and International Journal of Rural Education*, *30*(1), 64-81. https://doi.org/10.47381/aijre.v30i1.272

Hernández-Torrano, D. (2018). Urban–rural excellence gaps: Features, factors, and implications. *Roeper Review, 40*(1), 36-45. https://doi.org/10.1080/02783193.2018.1393610

Hlalele, D. (2012). Social justice and rural education in South Africa. *Perspectives in Education*, *30*(1), 111-118. https://hdl.handle.net/10520/EJC87656

Holloway, I., & Biley, F. C. (2011). Being a qualitative researcher. *Qualitative Health Research*, *21*(7), 968-975. https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732310395607

Holt-Lunstad, J. (2021). The major health implications of social connection. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, *30*(3), 251-259. https://doi.org/10.1177/0963721421999630

Hunter, E. (2007). Disadvantage and discontent: A review of issues relevant to the mental health of rural and remote Indigenous Australians. *Australian Journal of Rural Health*, *15*(2), 88-93. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1440-1584.2007.00869.x

Ibrahim, A., & El Zaatari, W. (2020). The teacher–student relationship and adolescents' sense of school belonging. *International Journal of Adolescence and Youth*, *25*(1), 382-395. https://doi.org/10.1080/02673843.2019.1660998

Irvin, M. J., Meece, J. L., Byun, S., Farmer, T. W., & Hutchins, B. C. (2011). Relationship of school context to rural youth's educational achievement and aspirations. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence, 40*(9), 1225-42. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10964-011-9628-8

Jackman, D., Myrick, F., & Yonge, O. J. (2010). Rural nursing in Canada: A voice unheard. *Online Journal of Rural Nursing and Health Care*, *10*(1), 60-69. https://doi.org/10.14574/ojrnhc.v10i1.74

Jeong, H., & Othman, J. (2016). Using interpretative phenomenological analysis from a realist perspective. *The Qualitative Report, 21*(3), 558-570. https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2016.2300

John, K. D., & Ford, D. (2017). The rural is nowhere: Bringing Indigeneity and urbanism into educational research. *Counterpoints*, *494*, 3–14r

Jong, M., Mendez, I., & Jong, R. (2019). Enhancing access to care in northern rural communities via telehealth. *International Journal of Circumpolar Health*, *78*(2), 1554174. https://doi.org/10.1080/22423982.2018.1554174

Just, M. A., & Carpenter, P. A. (1992). A capacity theory of comprehension: Individual differences in working memory. *Psychological Review, 99*(1), 122–149. https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-295X.99.1.122

Kassam, K.-A. (2010). Pluralism, resilience, and the ecology of survival: Case studies from the Pamir Mountains of Afghanistan. *Ecology & Society, 15*(8), 14-29. https://doi.org/10.5751/es-03485-150208

Kassam, K. A. S., Avery, L. M., & Ruelle, M. L. (2017). The cognitive relevance of Indigenous and rural: Why is it critical to survival? *Cultural Studies of Science Education, 12*(1), 97-118. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11422-016-9745-5

Katapally, T. R. (2020). A global digital citizen science policy to tackle pandemics like COVID-19. *Journal of Medical Internet Research*, *22*(5), e19357. https://doi:10.2196/19357 Kestler-D'Amours, J. & O'Toole, M. (2019, December 5). Nations divided: Mapping Canada's pipeline battle. Pulitzer Centre.

Koebisch, S. H., Rix, J. and Holmes, M., 2020. Recruitment and retention of healthcare professionals in rural Canada: a systematic review. Canadian Journal of Rural Medicine, 25 (2) 67-78. https://doi.org/10.4103/CJRM.CJRM_43_19

Kozleski, E. B., Thorius, K. K., & Smith, A. (2013). Theorizing systemic reform in urban schools. In E. Kozleski & K. K. Thorius (Eds.) *Ability, equity, and culture: Sustaining inclusive urban education reform*, (pp.11-35). Routledge.

Kunnath, J. P., & Jackson, A. (2019). Developing student critical consciousness: Twitter as a tool to apply critical literacy in the English classroom. *Journal of Media Literacy Education*, *11*(1), 52-74. https://doi.org/10.23860/JMLE-2019-11-1-3

Ladson-Billings, G. (2014). Culturally relevant pedagogy 2.0: aka the remix. *Harvard Educational Review*, *84*(1), 74-84. https://doi.org/10.17763/haer.84.1.p2rj131485484751

Lam, M. (2023). Promoting understanding and equity in rural Canada. In C. Banack & D. Pohler (Eds.), *Building Inclusive Communities in Rural Canada*, (pp.179-201). University of Alberta Press.

Liebenberg, L., Ungar, M., & Theron, L. (2014). Using video observation and photo elicitation interviews to understand obscured processes in the lives of youth resilience. *Childhood, 21*(4), 532-547. https://doi.org/10.1177/0907568213496652

Little, J. (2006). Gender and sexuality in rural communities. In P. Cloke, T. Marsden, & P. Mooney (Eds.), *Handbook of rural studies* (pp.365-378). Sage Publications.

Little, J. (2017). *Gender and rural geography*. Routledge.

Looker, E. D., & Bollman, R. D. (2020). Setting the stage: Overview of data on teachers and students in rural and urban Canada. In M. Corbett & D. Gereluk (Eds.), *Rural Teacher Education* (pp. 21-73). Springer.

Lowan-Trudeau, G. (2017). Gateway to understanding: Indigenous ecological activism and education in urban, rural, and remote contexts. *Cultural Studies of Science Education, 12*(1), 119-128. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11422-016-9746-4

Malherbe, N., Suffla, S., Seedat, M., & Bawa, U. (2016). Visually negotiating hegemonic discourse through Photovoice: Understanding youth representations of safety. *Discourse & Society*, *27*(6), 589-606. https://doi.org/10.1177/0957926516664255

Mahling, A., LeBlanc, M., & Peters, P. (2020). Rural resilience and community connections in health: Outcomes of a community workshop. *Spatial Determinants of Health Lab*, Carleton University. https://doi:10.22215/sdhlab/2020.1

Malhoit, G. C. (2005). Providing rural students with a high-quality education: The rural perspective on the concept of educational adequacy. *Rural School and Community Trust*, 1-26. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED497989.pdf

Manstead, A. S. (2018). The psychology of social class: How socioeconomic status impacts thought, feelings, and behaviour. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, *57*(2), 267-291. https://doi.org/10.1111/bjso.12251

Martin, D., Miller, A. P., Quesnel-Vallée, A., Caron, N. R., Vissandjée, B., & Marchildon, G. P. (2018). Canada's universal health-care system: achieving its potential. *The Lancet*, *391*(10131), 1718-1735. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(18)30181-8

Martinek, T., & Hellison, D. (1998). Values and goal-setting with underserved youth. *Journal of Physical Education, Recreation & Dance, 69*(7), 47-52. https://doi.org/10.1080/07303084.1998.10605594

Mathews, J., & Christopher, D. (2016). Action research for rural development. *SSRN Electronic Journal,* 1-12. https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2817784

Mayor, C., & Suarez, E. B. (2019). A scoping review of the demographic and contextual factors in Canada's educational opportunity gaps. *Canadian Journal of Education/Revue Canadienne de l'Éducation, 42*(1), 42-87. https://www.jstor.org/stable/26756655

McGill, N. (2016). Education attainment linked to health throughout lifespan: Exploring social determinants of health. *America Public Health Association, 46*(6), 1-19. http://thenationshealth.aphapublications.org/content/46/6/1.3

McIntosh, M. J., & Morse, J. M. (2015). Situating and constructing diversity in semi-structured interviews. *Global Qualitative Nursing Research*, *2*, 1-12. https://doi.org/10.1177/2333393615597674

McNiff, J. (2017). *Action research: All you need to know*. Sage Publications.

McQuaide, S. (2009). Making education equitable in rural China through distance learning. *International Review of Research in Open & Distance Learning, 10*(1), 1–21. https://doi.org/10.19173/irrodl.v10i1.590

Meit, M. (2018, Mar 14). *Achieving rural health equity and well-being: Proceedings of a workshop* [Conference presentation]. National Academies Press. https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK531871/

Merton, R. K. (1972). Insiders and outsiders: A chapter in the sociology of knowledge. *American Journal of Sociology*, *78*(1), 9-47. https://doi.org/10.1086/225294

Mian, O., & Strasser, R. P. (2017). How underserviced rural communities approach physician recruitment: changes following the opening of a socially accountable medical school in northern Ontario. *Canadian Journal of Rural Medicine*, *22*(4), 139-147. https://www.proquest.com/openview/f3bea90b0bbc0f79f6b51e07a93b91ee/1?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=45825

Mohatt, N.V., Mohatt, D. (2020). Rural prejudice-urban bias: The stories and structures that oppress rural communities. In L. Benuto, M. Duckworth, A. Masuda, & W. O'Donohue (Eds.), Prejudice, Stigma, Privilege, and Oppression (pp.1-23). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-35517-3_23

Mollenkopf, D. L. (2009). Creating highly qualified teachers. Maximising university resources to provide professional development in rural areas. *The Rural Educator, 30*(3), 34-39. https://doi.org/10.35608/ruraled.v30i3.447

Morse, J. M. (2015). Critical analysis of strategies for determining rigor in qualitative inquiry. *Qualitative Health Research, 25*(9), 1212-1222. https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732315588501

Municipality of Selected Community (2014). Nature's home town. http://www.greenstone.ca

Naeem, R. (2020). *A study of homelessness and migration in northern rural and urban centres in the Near North, Ontario, Canada, using GIS techniques* [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. Kingston University.

Nazariadli, S. (2018). *An urbannormative and orientalist critique of the representational bias in rural tourism* [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. North Carolina State University.

Nazariadli, S., Morais, D. B., Bunds, K., Baran, P., & Supak, S. (2019). Rural tourism microentrepreneurs' self-representation through photography: A counter-hegemonic approach, *Rural Society, 28*(1), 29-51. https://doi: 10.1080/10371656.2019.1576294

Nicholls, R. (2020). *A walk around the lake: Critical reflections of place of identity, equity and inclusion in an Ontario rural school board* [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. University of Toronto.

Noon, E. J. (2018). Interpretive phenomenological analysis: An appropriate methodology for educational research. *Journal of Perspectives in Applied Academic Practice, 6*(1), 75-83. https://doi.org/10.14297/jpaap.v6i1.304

Nguyen, N. H., Subhan, F. B., Williams, K., & Chan, C. B. (2020). Barriers and mitigating strategies to healthcare access in indigenous communities of Canada: A narrative review. *Healthcare, 8*(2), 99-122. https://doi.org/10.3390/healthcare8020112

Pratt, H. (1973). The advantages of mingling Indians with whites. In F. Prucha (Ed.), *Americanizing the American Indian: Writings by the "Friends of the Indian" 1880-1900* (pp. 260-271). Harvard University Press. https://doi.org/10.4159/harvard.9780674435056.c39

O'Malley, M. D., Wendt, S., & Pate, C. (2018). A view from the top: Superintendents' perceptions of mental health supports in rural school districts. *Educational Administration Quarterly, 54*(5), 781-821. https://doi.org/10.1177/0013161x18785871

Oliffe, J. L., Bottorff, J. L., Kelly, M., & Halpin, M. (2008). Analyzing participant produced photographs from an ethnographic study of fatherhood and smoking. *Research in Nursing & Health, 31(*5), 529-539. https://doi.org/10.1002/nur.20269

Orben, A., Tomova, L., & Blakemore, S. J. (2020). The effects of social deprivation on adolescent development and mental health. *The Lancet Child & Adolescent Health*, *4*(8), 634-640. https://doi.org/10.1016/S2352-4642(20)30186-3

Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. (2018). Equity in education: Breaking down barriers to social mobility. *PISA*, OECD Publishing, https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264073234-en.

Ontario Ministry of Education. (1993). Education in Ontario: Policy and program direction. Ontario Ministry of Education. https://www.ontario.ca/document/education-ontario-policy-and-program-direction/policyprogram-memorandum-118

Ontario Ministry of Education. (2009). Equity and Inclusion Policy. Ontario Ministry of Education. https://files.ontario.ca/edu-equity-inclusive-education-strategy-2009-en-2022-01-13.pdf

Ontario Ministry of Education (2011). Education Funding. Ontario Ministry of Education. https://camerisefsl.ca/resources/ontario-ministry-of-education-2011-education-funding-technical-paper-2011-12/

Ontario Ministry of Education. (2014). Achieving excellence: A renewed vision for education in Ontario. Queen's Printer for Ontario, 1-23. https://www.oise.utoronto.ca/atkinson/UserFiles/File/Policy_Monitor/ON_01_04_14_-_renewedVision.pdf

Ontario Ministry of Education (2016). Supporting students and communities. Ontario Ministry of Education. https://www.ontario.ca/page/supporting-students-and-communities

Ontario Ministry of Education. (2017a). Ontario Rural Education Strategy. Queen's Printer for Ontario, 1-12. https://www.ontario.ca/page/consultation-ontarios-rural-education-strategy

Ontario Ministry of Education. (2017b). Ontario Education Equity Action Plan. Queen's Printer for Ontario, 1-37. https://www.ontario.ca/page/ontarios-education-equity-action-plan

Ontario Ministry of Education. (2020). Education in Ontario. Ontario Ministry of Education. https://www.ontario.ca/page/education-ontario

Ontario Ministry of Education (2022). Ontario Curriculum. Ontario Ministry of Education. https://www.dcp.edu.gov.on.ca/en/

Ontario Public School Boards Association. (2018, March 26). Education funding targeting key areas to better support student health, well-being and success. https://www.newswire.ca/news-releases/education-funding-targeting-key-areas-to-better-support-student-health-well-being-and-success-677946663.html

Owens, P. E. (2018). "We just want to play": Adolescents speak about their access to public parks. *Children, Youth & Environments*, *28*(2), 146-158. https://doi.org/10.7721/chilyoutenvi.28.2.0146

Özgenel, M. (2020). An organizational factor predicting school effectiveness: School climate. *International Journal of Psychology and Educational Studies*, *7*(1), 38-50. https://doi.org/10.17220/ijpes.2020.01.004

Paley, J. (2016). Phenomenology as qualitative research: A critical analysis of meaning attribution. In J. Paley (Ed.), Smith, Flowers, and Larkin: The HIV interview (pp.121-150). Taylor & Francis.

Patton, M.Q. (1980). *Qualitative evaluation methods.* Sage Publications.

Pelletier, C. A., Pousette, A., Ward, K., Keahey, R., Fox, G., Allison, S., Rasali, D., & Faulkner, G. (2020). Implementation of physical activity interventions in rural, remote, and northern communities: A scoping review. *Inquiry, 57*, 1–13. https://doi/10.1177/0046958020935662

Peshkin, A. (2000). The nature of interpretation in qualitative research. *Educational Researcher*, *29*(9), 5–9. https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X029009005

Perry, L. B. (2009). Conceptualizing education policy in democratic societies. *Educational Policy, 23*(3), 423–450. https://doi.org/10.1177/0895904807310032

Peterson, S. S., McIntyre, L., & Heppner, D. (2018). Northern rural and Indigenous teachers' experiences and perceptions of rural teaching and teacher education. *Journal of Teacher Education and Educators, 7*(3), 189-205. https://dergipark.org.tr/en/pub/jtee/issue/43443/530189

Peterson, S. S., & Portier, C. (2017). Rural northern Canadian teachers' discoveries about young children's oral language. *Language and Literacy*, *19*(2), 109-126. https://doi.org/10.20360/g2wt16

Philo, C. (1992). Neglected rural geographies: A review. *Journal of Rural Studies, 8*(2), 193-207. https://doi.org/10.1016/0743-0167(92)90077-J

Pickin, L., Brunsden, V., & Hill, R. (2011). Exploring the emotional experiences of foster carers using the photovoice technique. *Adoption & Fostering, 35*(2), 61-75. https://doi.org/10.1177/030857591103500207

Plunkett, R., Leipert, B. D., & Ray, S. L. (2013). Unspoken phenomena: Using the photovoice method to enrich phenomenological inquiry. *Nursing Inquiry, 20*(2), 156-164. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1440-1800.2012.00594.x

Pugh, R., & Cheers, B. (2010). *Rural social work: International perspectives*. Policy Press.

Rae, L., Edgerton, E., & McKechnie, J. (2023). Social places and senior pupils' identity in a secondary school environment: An interpretative phenomenological analysis. *Children, Youth and Environments 33*(1), 76-100. https://doi:10.1353/cye.2023.0001.

Rao, N., & Hossain, M. I. (2011). Confronting poverty and educational inequalities: Madrasas as a strategy for contesting dominant literacy in rural Bangladesh. *International Journal of Educational Development*, *31*(6), 623-633. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedudev.2011.01.012

Rapa, L. J., Diemer, M. A., & Bañales, J. (2018). Critical action as a pathway to social mobility among marginalized youth. *Developmental Psychology, 54*(1), 127-137. https://doi.org/10.1037/dev0000414

Reading, C., Khupe, C., Redford, M., Wallin, D., Versland, T., Taylor, N., & Hampton, P. (2019). Educating for sustainability in remote locations. *Rural Educator, 40*(2), 43-53. https://doi.org/10.35608/ruraled.v40i2.849

RedCorn, A., Johnson, J., Bergeron, L., & Hayman, J. (2022). Critical Indigenous perspectives in rural education. In A.P. Azano, K. Eppley, & C. Biddle (Eds.), *The bloomsbury handbook of rural education in the United States* (pp. 235–246). Bloomsbury Academic.

Reid, J. A. (2017). Rural education practice and policy in marginalised communities: Teaching and learning on the edge. *Australian and International Journal of Rural Education, 27*(1), 88-99. https://search.informit.com.au/documentSummary;dn=809768741670049;res=IELIND

Rezai-Rashti, G., Segeren, A., & Martino, W. (2017). The new articulation of equity education in neoliberal times: the changing conception of social justice in Ontario. *Globalisation, Societies and Education*, *15*(2), 160-174. https://doi.org/10.1080/14767724.2016.1169514

Rezai-Rashti, G., Zhang, B., Abdmolaei, S., & Segeren, A. (2021). A critical policy analysis of the Ontario equity and inclusive strategy: The dynamics of non-performativity. *Journal of*

Higher Education Policy and Leadership Studies, *2*(4), 7-25. https://doi:10.52547/johepal.2.4.7

Rintoul, H., & Bishop, P. (2019). Principals and vice-principals: Exploring the history of leading and managing public schools in Ontario, Canada. *Journal of educational administration and history*, *51*(1), 15-26. https://doi.org/10.1080/00220620.2018.1513913

Rishworth, A., Niraula, A., Dean, J., Wilson, K., Ghassemi, E., & Baldo, A. (2022). Rural futures? Mapping newcomers' hopes about potential resettlement in Canadian rural areas. *The Canadian Geographer/Le Géographe canadien*. https://doi.org/10.1111/cag.12803

Rittel, H. W., & Webber, M. M. (1973). Dilemmas in a general theory of planning. *Policy Sciences*, *4*(2), 155-169. https://doi.org/10.1007/bf01405730

Rose, T., Sharpe, T. L., Shdaimah, C., & deTablan, D. (2018). Exploring coping among urban youth through photovoice. *Qualitative Social Work*, *17*(6), 795-813. https://doi.org/10.1177/1473325017693684

Roosevelt, E. (2008). Good citizenship: The purpose of education. *Teachers College Record*, *110*(14), 312-320. https://doi.org/10.1177/016146810811001499

Rowley, K. J., Edmunds, C. C., Dufur, M. J., Jarvis, J. A., & Silveira, F. (2020). Contextualising the achievement gap: Assessing educational achievement, inequality, and disadvantage in high-income countries. *Comparative Education*, *56*(4), 459-483. https://doi.org/10.1080/03050068.2020.1769928

Ryan, P. A. (1956). Equity: System or process. *Geo. LJ, 1*(3), 59-68.

Sadler, E. L., (2016). *A photovoice exploration and interpretive phenomenological analysis of childhood cancer survivorship into adulthood* [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. Ball State University.

Saunders, M. N. (2012). *Choosing research participants. Qualitative organizational research: Core methods and current challenges*. Sage Publications.

Sauvageot, C., & da Graća, P. D. (2007). *Using indicators in planning education for rural people: A practical guide*. International Institute for Educational Planning. https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED499630

Secules, S., McCall, C., Mejia, J. A., Beebe, C., Masters, A. S., L. Sánchez-Peña, M., & Svyantek, M. (2021). Positionality practices and dimensions of impact on equity research: A collaborative inquiry and call to the community. *Journal of Engineering Education*, *110*(1), 19-43. https://doi.org/10.1002/jee.20377

Shah, V. (2018). Different numbers, different stories: Problematizing “gaps" in Ontario and the TDSB. *Canadian Journal of Educational Administration and Policy,* (187), 31-47. https://journalhosting.ucalgary.ca/index.php/cjeap/article/view/43198

Shek, D. T., Dou, D., Zhu, X., & Chai, W. (2019). Positive youth development: Current perspectives. *Adolescent health, medicine and therapeutics*, *10*, 131-141. https://doi.org/10.2147/ahmt.s179946

Shaw, J. M. (1979). *Rural deprivation and planning*. Geo Books.

Simon, M. (2011). The role of the researcher. https://portal.regenesys.net/course/discussions/editors/kcfinder/upload/files/The%20roles%20of%20the%20researcher%2C%202011%20httpdissertationrecipes.com-wp-content-uploads-2011-04-Role-of-the-Researcher.pdf.pdf

Smith, F., & Flowers, P. Larkin. M. (2009). *Interpretative phenomenological analysis: Theory, method and research.* Sage Publications.

Smith, J. A. (2011). Evaluating the contribution of interpretative phenomenological analysis. *Health Psychology Review, 5*(1), 9-27. https://doi.org/10.1080/17437199.2010.510659

Smith, J. A., & Nizza, I. E. (2022). *Essentials of interpretative phenomenological analysis*. American Psychological Association.

Statistics Canada. (2017). Population centre and rural area classification 2016. Statistics Canada. https://www.statcan.gc.ca/eng/subjects/standard/pcrac/2016/introduction

Statistics Canada. (2018). A profile of youth not in employment, education or training (NEET) in Canada, 2015 to 2017. Statistics Canada. https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/en/pub/11f0019m/11f0019m2019020-eng.pdf?st=JcDJZg9F

Steeves, L. E., Carr-Stewart, S., & Marshall, J. (2010). Aboriginal student educational attainment: A Saskatchewan perspective. *EAF Journal, 21*(2), 19-31. https://doi.org/10.37119/ojs2011.v17i2.84

Steffy, B. D., & Grimes, A. J. (1986). A critical theory of organization science. *Academy of Management Review*, *11*(2), 322-336. https://doi.org/10.5465/amr.1986.4283115

Stelmach, B. L. (2011). A synthesis of International rural education issues and responses. *Rural Educator*, *32*(2), 32-42. https://doi.org/10.35608/ruraled.v32i2.432

Strasser, R., Hogenbirk, J. C., Minore, B., Marsh, D. C., Berry, S., Mccready, W. G., & Graves, L. (2013). Transforming health professional education through social accountability: Canada's Northern Ontario School of Medicine. *Medical Teacher, 35*(6), 490-496. https://doi.org/10.3109/0142159x.2013.774334

Strasser, R., Couper, I., Wynn-Jones, J., Rourke, J., Chater, A. B., & Reid, S. (2016). Education for rural practice in rural practice. *Education for Primary Care*, *27*(1), 10-14. https://doi.org/10.1080/14739879.2015.1128684

Sullivan, K., McConney, A., & Perry, L. B. (2018). A comparison of rural educational disadvantage in Australia, Canada, and New Zealand using OECD's PISA. *Sage Open, 8(*4), 1-12, https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244018805791

Suri, H. (2011). Purposeful sampling in qualitative research synthesis. *Qualitative Research Journal, 11*(2), 63-75. https://doi.org/10.3316/QRJ1102063

Sutton-Brown, C. A. (2014). Photovoice: A methodological guide. *Photography and Culture, 7(*2), 169-185. https://doi.org/10.2752/175145214x13999922103165

Tatlah, I. A., Iqbal, M. Z., Amin, M., & Quraishi, U. (2014). Effect of leadership behaviour of principals on students' academic achievement at secondary level: A comparison of the leaders and teachers' perceptions. *Journal of Research & Reflections in Education, 8*(1), 1-12. https://ue.edu.pk/jrre/articles/81001.pdf

Thier, M., & Beach, P. (2019). Stories we don't tell: Research's limited accounting of rural schools. *School Leadership Review, 14*(2), 1-17. https://scholarworks.sfasu.edu/slr/vol14/iss2/5

Thompson, D. (June 29, 2017). School board windfall: $480,000 in Ministry funding for rural and Northern schools. Baytoday. https://www.baytoday.ca/local-news/the-near-north-district-school-board-received-an-unexpected-480000-in-ministry-funding-for-rural-and-northern-schools-656973

Tilley, S. A. (2016). *Doing respectful research: Power, privilege and passion.* Fernwood Publishing.

Tilley, S., & Taylor, L. (2018). Qualitative methods and respectful praxis: Researching with youth. *The Qualitative Report*, *23*(9), 2184-2204. https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2018.3482

Tomar, N., & Stoffel, V. (2014). Examining the lived experience and factors influencing education of two student veterans using photovoice methodology. *American Journal of Occupational Therapy, 68*(4), 430-438. https://doi.org/10.5014/ajot.2014.011163

Tomyn, A. J., Cummins, R. A., & Norrish, J. M. (2015). The subjective wellbeing of 'at-risk' indigenous and non-indigenous Australian adolescents. *Journal of Happiness Studies, 16*(4), 813-837. http://dx.doi.org.ezproxy.lakeheadu.ca/10.1007/s10902-014-9535-2

Tuck, E., & Yang, K. W. (2012). Decolonization is not a metaphor. *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society 1*(01), 1-40. https://doi.org/10.25058/20112742.n38.04.

Tümkaya, S., Kayiran, B. K., Tanhan, A., & Arslan, Ü. (2021). Using online photovoice (OPV) to understand youths' perceptions of distance education during COVID-19. *International Journal of Education and Literacy Studies*, *9*(4), 45-60. https://doi.org/10.7575/aiac.ijels.v.9n.4p.45

Tuters, S. (2015). Conceptualising diversity in a rural school. *International Journal of Inclusive Education, 19*(7), 685-696. https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2014.964573

Tuhiwai Smith, L. (2012). *Decolonizing methodologies: Research and Indigenous peoples* (2nd ed.). Otago University Press.

Twenge, J. M., Martin, G. N., & Campbell, W. K. (2018). Decreases in psychological well-being among American adolescents after 2012 and links to screen time during the rise of smartphone technology. *Emotion*, *18*(6), 765. https://doi.org/10.1037/emo0000403

Tyack, D. (2004). *Seeking common ground: Public schools in a diverse society*. Harvard University Press.

van Manen, M. (1997). Researching lived experience. Sage Publications.

Valentine, K. (2017). *The Equity studies classroom: Utilizing teacher identity in pedagogy* (Masters thesis). University of Toronto.

Valentine, K. D., Kopcha, T. J., & Vagle, M. D. (2018). Phenomenological methodologies in the field of educational communications and technology. *TechTrends, 62*(5), 462-472. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11528-018-0317-2

Vanner, C. (2022). Education about gender-based violence: Opportunities and obstacles in the Ontario secondary school curriculum. *Gender and Education*, *34*(2), 134-150. https://doi.org/10.1080/09540253.2021.1884193

Vinson, T., Rawsthorne, M., Beavis, A., & Ericson, M. (2015). Dropping off the edge 2015: Persistent communal disadvantage in Australia. *Jesuit Social Services/Catholic Social Services Australia*, 115-126. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/299389688_Dropping_off_the_edge_Persistent_communal_disadvantage_in_Australia

Volante, L. (2007). Educational quality and accountability in Ontario: Past, present, and future. *Canadian Journal of Educational Administration and Policy, 58*, 1–21. https://cdm.ucalgary.ca/index.php/cjeap/article/view/42739

Walker, L. (2019). Giving voice to First Nations young people disengaged from education in the northern territory with a specific focus on barriers to education and their aspirations for the future. *Australian & International Journal of Rural Education, 29*(1), 58-71. https://journal.spera.asn.au/index.php/AIJRE/article/view/179

Wallin, D. J. (2007). *Attachment in psychotherapy*. Guilford press.

Wallin, D. C., & Newton, P. (2014). Teaching principals in small rural schools: "My cup overfloweth". *Alberta Journal of Educational Research, 60*(4), 708-725. https://doi.org/10.11575/ajer.v60i4.55982

Wang, C. C. (1999). Photovoice: A participatory action research strategy applied to women's health. *Journal of Women's Health, 8*(2), 185-192. https://doi.org/10.1089/jwh.1999.8.185

Wang, F. (2018). Social justice leadership—Theory and practice: A case of Ontario. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, *54*(3), 470-498. https://doi.org/10.1177/0013161X18761341

Wang, P. (2013). Examining the digital divide between rural and urban schools: Technology availability, teachers' integration level and students' perception. *Journal of Curriculum and Teaching, 2*(2), 127-139. doi: https://doi.org/10.5430/jct.v2n2p127

Wang, C., & Burris, M. A. (1994). Empowerment through photo novella: Portraits of participation. *Health Education Quarterly, 21*(2), 171-186. https://doi.org/10.1177/109019819402100204

Wang, C., & Burris, M. A. (1997). Photovoice: Concept, methodology, and use for participatory needs assessment. *Health Education & Behavior*, *24*(3), 369-387. https://doi.org/10.1177/109019819702400309

Watts, R. J., Diemer, M. A., & Voight, A. M. (2011). Critical consciousness: Current status and future directions. *New Directions for Child and Adolescent Development*, *134*(1), 43-57. https://doi.org/10.1002/cd.310

Watts, R. J., & Hipolito-Delgado, C. P. (2015). Thinking ourselves to liberation?: Advancing sociopolitical action in critical consciousness. *The Urban Review*, *47*, 847-867. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11256-015-0341-x

Wilson, N., Dasho, S., Martin, A. C., Wallerstein, N., Wang, C. C., & Minkler, M. (2007). Engaging young adolescents in social action through photovoice: The youth empowerment strategies (YES!) project. *The Journal of Early Adolescence*, *27*(2), 241–261. https://doi.org/10.1177/0272431606294834

Wilson, C. R., Rourke, J., Oandasan, I. F., & Bosco, C. (2020). Progress made on access to rural health care in Canada. *Canadian Family Physician*, *66*(1), 31-36. https://doi.org/10.4103/cjrm.cjrm_84_19

Wilson-Forsebery, S. & Easley, J. (2012). Potholes along the roads: The ethics of health research in rural and remote Canada. In J. Kulig & A. M. Williams (Eds.), *Health in Rural Canada* (pp. 280-298). UBC Press.

Woodell, B. (2018). Understanding sexual minority health disparities in rural areas. *Sociology Compass, 12*(2), e12553- e12562. https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.12553

Yosso, T. J. (2005). Whose culture has capital? A critical race theory discussion of community cultural wealth. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, *8*(1), 69-91. https://doi.org/10.1080/1361332052000341006

Yosso, T. J., & Burciaga, R. (2016). Reclaiming our histories, recovering community cultural wealth. *Center for Critical Race Studies at UCLA Research Brief*, *5*, 1-4. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003005995-8

Young, I. M. (2014). Five faces of oppression. *Albany: State University of New York*, 3-23. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203935569-42

Zapf, M. K. (2010). Northern service delivery: Strategies and considerations. In R. Delaney and K. Brownlee (Eds.), *Northern & rural social work practice: A Canadian perspective* (pp. 1-17). Hignell Book Printing.

Zarifa, D., Seward, B., & Milian, R. P. (2019). Location, location, location: Examining the rural-urban skills gap in Canada. *Journal of Rural Studies*, *72*, 252-263. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2019.10.032

Zeichner, K., Lieberman, A., Osmond-Johnson, P., & Campbell, C. (2017). *Empowered educators in Canada: How high-performing systems shape teaching quality*. John Wiley & Sons.

Appendix A

Photovoice Virtual Orientation

Thank you again for agreeing to participate in this research study on **Youth Perspectives on Equitable Education in a Rural and Remote Secondary School.** The purpose of this virtual session is to give you information on:

1. The basic of this research study (The 5 Ws)
    a. confidentiality, anonymity, ethical guidelines and informed consent
    b. overview of the research
    c. photovoice
    d. interviews and focus group
    e. social action
2. The basics of photovoice[1]
    a. education about photography, and sharing/discussing photographs
    b. introduction to photography by Northwestern Ontario photographer, Shannon Lepere to learn how to take a good photo
    c. how to write captions and meanings to photos
    d. Taking Photographs Safely
        i. Be respectful (i.e. be polite when approaching others, do not invade the private space of others)
        ii. Don't do anything you wouldn't usually do (i.e., take a photograph while driving or taking a photograph in a location that puts you in danger)

[1] Amos, S., Read, K., Cobb, M., & Pabani, N. (2012). Facilitating a photovoice project: What you need to know! The Nova Scotia Participatory Food Costing Project. 1-32 Retrieved from https://foodarc.ca/makefoodmatter/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/VOICES_PhotovoiceManual.pdf

iii. Don’t go anywhere you wouldn’t usually go

iv. Be aware of your surroundings when taking photos

v. Ask first before taking a photo and be sure that the subject signs the photo release form or if on someone’s personal property, the private property release form

3. Themes and prompts for picture taking

    a. 25-30 photographs that they deem meaningful to them about their experience about a northern rural education over a span of two weeks. Themes and prompts for picture taking:

    b. Photos to capture the experiences of being educated in a northern rural school.

    c. There are no right or wrongs; these photos are meant to be unique to your experiences.

    d. Prompts for photo taking will be:

        i. This is my northern, rural schooling story

        ii. This is where I belong

        iii. This is my school at its best

        iv. This is something I would like to change

        v. This is something I would like to see change in the future

    e. Logbooks will be provided to capture insights during the data-collecting phase (it is also a way to communicate with the researcher confidentially).

        i. narrate their photos in logbooks using the SHOWeD strategy[2]. The SHOWED strategy asks the following:

[2] Wang, C. C. (1999). Photovoice: A participatory action research strategy applied to women's health. *Journal of Women's Health*, *8*(2), 185-192.

1. What do you **s**ee here?
2. What is **h**appening here?
3. How does this relate to **o**ur lives?
4. **W**hy does this problem or strength exist?
5. How could this image **e**ducate the community (school) or policymakers?
6. What can we **d**o about it?

Or use the photo capturing template (optional)

P	Describe your **P**hoto
H	What is **H**appening in your picture?
O	Why did you take the picture **O**f this?
T	What does **T**his picture tell us about you and your school community?

O	How can this picture provide **O**pportunities to improve?

I will connect with you in a week to check in and see if you have any questions or concerns. Let me know if you prefer a call, text or Microsoft Teams virtual session. You can call/text/email if you have questions or concerns at any point.

Appendix B

List of interviews questions:

1. Semi-structured interview question questions
    i. Could you tell me a little about yourself and your schooling experiences so far?

ii. Could you give me an idea of what its like for someone to come to school here?

iii. What are the advantages and/or disadvantages of coming to school here?

iv. What do you think about the curriculum?

v. What does going to school mean to you?

vi. How do you get to and from school?

vii. Could you give me an example of that?

viii. What do you want to change about the school?

ix. What do you think gets in the way of change in the school?

x. How would you describe a fair school?

xi. What do you value your rural school and schooling?

xii. If you could change anything about your schooling experiences to make it better, what would it be and why?

xiii. What are the main differences between a good and equitable educational experience and an unfair and inequitable educational experience?

xiv. What is unique about a northern rural schooling experience?

    1. Does that help you or hold you back?
    2. How?

xv. How do you think your educational experience compares to that of a larger school?

xvi. Do you think if you went to school in a bigger city your experience would be different than now? If so, how; if not, why?

xvii. From 1-10, what score would you give your schooling for the quality of education? Why? What else?

xviii. From 1-10, what score would you give your schooling for the fairness in education? Why? What else?

From 1-10, what score would you give your schooling for opportunities (sports, drama, arts, extra curriculars, etc)? Why? What else?

Appendix C

Focus Group Agenda

- Introduce Photovoice to the participants
- Icebreaker activities
- Review Ethics
- Review group rules and guidelines as well as the importance maintaining confidentiality of others
- Share and discuss participant photographs

    - What was it like to take pictures?
    - What do you know now that you didn't know before the study?
    - How do your photos explain what it is like to go to a northern rural school?
    - How do your photos describe your school?
    - How do your photos describe what you are satisfied/ dissatisfied with at your school?
    - What do you need to feel proud of this high school? Does this school have these things? If not, how do you think you could get these?
    - What gets in the way of improving student achievement in this school?
    - How do your photos capture what helps you or presents you from overcoming barriers to education?
    - How do your photos capture the kinds of support for success you have or don't have?
    - What else do your photos capture?
- Develop themes
- Select a target audience for the photography exhibit
- Plan the photography exhibit/display

I will remain involved as a co-participant for the exhibit, however the exhibit will not be a part of the data collection.

Appendix D

Example of communication letter for

First Nation 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5. Redacted for confidentiality.

Dear Chief [omitted], Councillor [omitted] and Councillor [omitted];

Re: Communication letter with First Nation communities about proposed research

My name is Tammy Piché. I am a PhD candidate in the Joint PhD in educational studies at Lakehead University. I am writing to you to provide you with information on a proposed research project for my PhD thesis. I have received Research Ethics Board Approval (REB **-****PICHE) from Lakehead University's Research Ethics Board committee and permission from [omitted] to engage in research titled *Youth Perspectives on Equitable Education in a Northern Rural and Remote Secondary School.*

The research project will take place in the community at the selected school with students who attend the school. [omitted] is a part of the amalgamated region of [omitted], and [omitted] is your traditional territory. To my knowledge, some students at the selected school are from your community and therefore, there is a possibility that one of your community members, who are students of the selected school, may participate in this research. Although the research will focus on the larger community of youth attending the selected school without a precise recruitment focus on Indigenous youth, I want to include you so that you are aware of the research and are able to provide culturally sensitive feedback should you have any. Please know that you can contact me at any time should you have questions or concerns about it. I plan on gathering data in Fall 2021, write up my results in Winter 2022, and defend my thesis in Fall 2022. In the next paragraphs, I would like to introduce myself, explain the scope of the research, and invite feedback.

I am a white, Settler Francophone woman living in [omitted]. I am from [omitted]. I lived there for 22 years and consider the town my home. I have two young children and a partner. Some of you may know who I am because my parents and grandparents have lived in [omitted] since the 1950s. Aside from being a PhD student in Educational Studies at Lakehead University, I am a trained clinical Social Worker. Growing up in the small, rural community of [omitted], I discovered the significant differences in opportunity for youth between rural and urban settings, particularly in education. This lived experience sparked my interest in the research topic that I am studying, and I am hoping that this research will shed light on the barriers and strengths of education that rural youth face and overcome.

Thank you for taking the time to read this letter. I value and encourage any sharings of wisdom and culturally informed input to enhance sensitivity to recruitment, data collection, and analysis/dissemination of this very important research. Enclosed in this package is a copy of the information letter that will be provided to participants, as well as a copy of the interview guide that includes the questions I will ask participants. I will be calling your band office in approximately 2 weeks to follow up on this letter to encourage dialogue and feedback on this research project.

Yours sincerely:

Tammy Piché, PhD candidate

Faculty of Education

Lakehead University

955 Oliver Rd.

Thunder Bay, ON P7B 5E1

tpiche1@lakeheadu.ca

Dr. Seth Agbo

Supervisor and associate professor

Faculty of Education

Lakehead University (Orillia)

500 University Ave

Orillia, ON L3V 0B9

sagbo@lakeheadu.ca

cc

Tom Rivers, Vice Principal, Geraldton Composite High School, Superior-Greenstone District School Board; trivers@sgdsb.on.ca

Shy-Anne Bartlett, Manager of Indigenous Education, Superior-Greenstone District School Board; sbartlett@sgdsb.on.ca

Appendix E

Re: Telephone script for follow up phone call with First Nation Communities.

-Greet and introduce self;

-Ask to speak to Chief/ or council members addressed on initial letter (back up is to ask to speak to the Band Councillor for the education portfolio)

-Introduce self again and purpose of call-

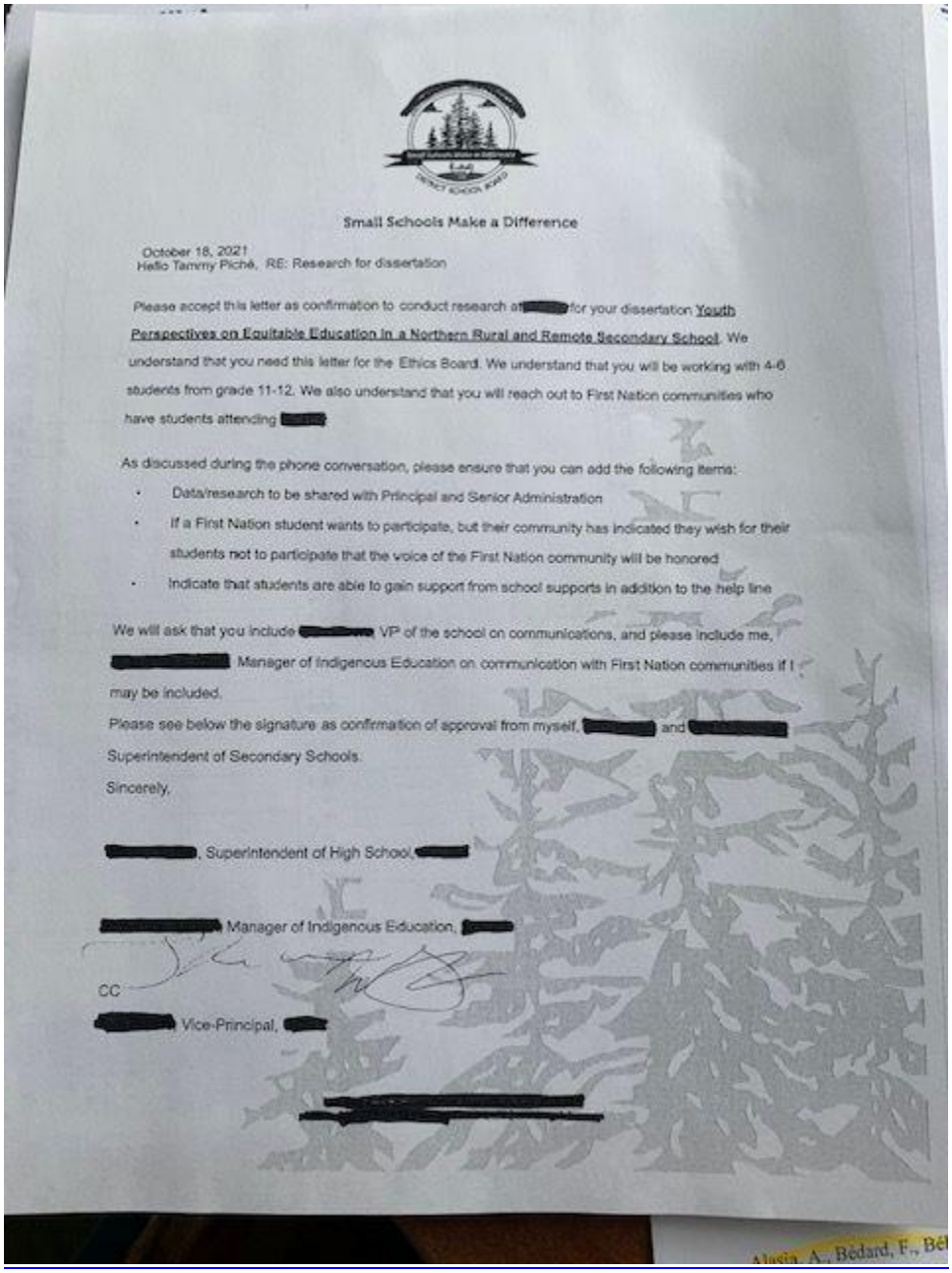
-Ask if they had an opportunity to read the communication letter to seek input or answer questions.

-if yes; answers questions and ask if there is anything else I can do to improve the cultural sensitivity of research, ask if there is anything I am missing, ask if there is anything I should consider before conducting research.

-if no- go over letter on the phone and answers questions/ invite same input as above.

-if unable to reach someone- follow up in a few days and begin research.

Appendix F



Small Schools Make a Difference

October 18, 2021
Hello Tammy Piché, RE: Research for dissertation

Please accept this letter as confirmation to conduct research at [redacted] for your dissertation Youth Perspectives on Equitable Education in a Northern Rural and Remote Secondary School. We understand that you need this letter for the Ethics Board. We understand that you will be working with 4-6 students from grade 11-12. We also understand that you will reach out to First Nation communities who have students attending [redacted].

As discussed during the phone conversation, please ensure that you can add the following items:

- Data/research to be shared with Principal and Senior Administration
- If a First Nation student wants to participate, but their community has indicated they wish for their students not to participate that the voice of the First Nation community will be honored
- Indicate that students are able to gain support from school supports in addition to the help line

We will ask that you include [redacted], VP of the school on communications, and please include me, [redacted], Manager of Indigenous Education on communication with First Nation communities if I may be included.

Please see below the signature as confirmation of approval from myself, [redacted] and [redacted] Superintendent of Secondary Schools.

Sincerely,

[redacted], Superintendent of High School [redacted]

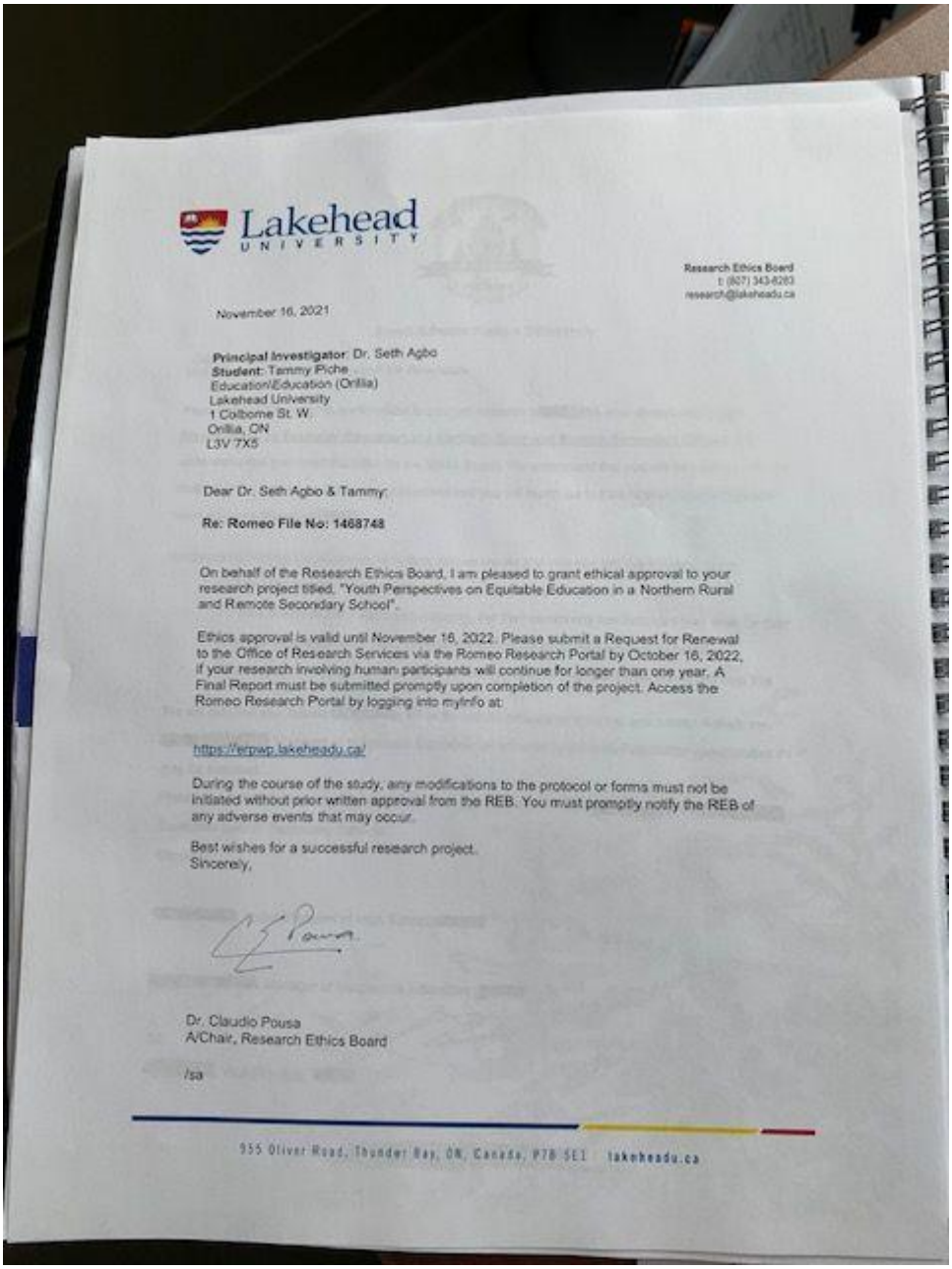
[redacted], Manager of Indigenous Education, [redacted]

CC

[redacted], Vice-Principal, [redacted]

[redacted]

Appendix G



Lakehead UNIVERSITY

Research Ethics Board
t: (807) 343-8283
research@lakeheadu.ca

November 16, 2021

Principal Investigator: Dr. Seth Agbo
Student: Tammy Piche
Education/Education (Orillia)
Lakehead University
1 Colborne St. W.
Orillia, ON
L3V 7X5

Dear Dr. Seth Agbo & Tammy:

Re: Romeo File No: 1468748

On behalf of the Research Ethics Board, I am pleased to grant ethical approval to your research project titled, "Youth Perspectives on Equitable Education in a Northern Rural and Remote Secondary School".

Ethics approval is valid until November 16, 2022. Please submit a Request for Renewal to the Office of Research Services via the Romeo Research Portal by October 16, 2022, if your research involving human participants will continue for longer than one year. A Final Report must be submitted promptly upon completion of the project. Access the Romeo Research Portal by logging into mylnfo at:

https://erpwp.lakeheadu.ca/

During the course of the study, any modifications to the protocol or forms must not be initiated without prior written approval from the REB. You must promptly notify the REB of any adverse events that may occur.

Best wishes for a successful research project.
Sincerely,

Dr. Claudio Pousa
A/Chair, Research Ethics Board

/sa

955 Oliver Road, Thunder Bay, ON, Canada, P7B 5E1 lakeheadu.ca

Appendix H

PANEL ON RESEARCH ETHICS
Navigating the ethics of human research

TCPS 2: CORE

Certificate of Completion

This document certifies that

Tammy Piche

has completed the Tri-Council Policy Statement:
Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans
Course on Research Ethics (TCPS 2: CORE)

Date of Issue: **10 October, 2013**

Appendix I

Letter of Introduction to
School Boards and Schools, Parents and Guardians

Youth Perspectives on Equitable Education in a Northern Rural and Remote Secondary School

My name is Tammy Piché. I am a PhD candidate in the Joint PhD in educational studies at Lakehead University. I have received Research Ethics Board Approval (REB **-****PICHE) from Lakehead University's Research Ethics Board committee to engage in a study titled *Youth Perspectives on Equitable Education in a Northern Rural and Remote Secondary School.*

I invite participation in a research study of 4-6 students from grade 11 and grade 12 at Geraldton Composite High School (GCHS) to explore equity and inequity in education from student-youth perspectives in a northern rural and remote public secondary school context; to identify strengths and barriers to educational success in an isolated geographic milieu; and discover novel ways of solving disparities. The reason for focusing on youth perspectives on equitable rural education is twofold: one, youth are less researched and excluded from our current understanding; and two, a critical examination of their school experiences may provide insider knowledge that can bring about change.

I will collect data through photovoice, virtual interviews and a virtual focus group through Microsoft Teams- a platform that GCHS uses regularly to teach their students. Photovoice is a powerful research method that allows participants to share their experiences, perceptions and understandings through photos and attaching personalized meanings to them. Social action is usually an outcome that many research participants chose to do after photovoice. Although social action will not be a part of data collection, I will support the participants beyond the scope of this research timeline, in whichever way I can, if they chose to do something with the photos afterwards.

Photovoice

Participants will be asked to take 25-30 photographs with a camera phone (a point and shoot camera will be provided if no camera phone available) that they deem meaningful about their experience at their school over a span of two weeks. Prompts for photo taking will be:

- This is my northern, rural schooling story
- This is where I belong
- This is my school at its best
- This is something I would like to change
- This is something I would like to see changed in the future

Virtual Interviews

Participants will be asked to share their thoughts on equitable rural education in a single one-to-one virtual semi-structured interview for 45-60 minutes. Interviews will be audiotaped to ensure I am accurately understanding your voice. Semi structured interviews follow a fluid script of questions, but they are meant to build on the responses on the participants to allow a deeper understanding of their perspectives of equitable rural education. Examples of questions are:

- What is it like to come to school here?
- Could you tell me about your experiences in a northern rural school?
- What does it look like?
- If you were to choose a phone that represents your school, what kind would it be and why?
- How do you get to and from school?
- How would you describe a fair school?
- What do you value your rural school and schooling?
- What do you need to reach to your highest potential in this school?
- What are the main differences between a good and equitable educational experience and an unfair and inequitable educational experience?
- How do you think your educational experience compares to that of a larger school?

Virtual Focus Group

The last part of the data collection phase is the focus group. I anticipate that the focus group discussions will take 60-90 minutes. The virtual focus group will be audiotaped to ensure accuracy of the participants voice, and to enhance my participation in the conversation. The following questions will guide the focus group discussions:

- What was it like to take pictures?
- What do you know now that you didn't know before the study?
- How do your photos explain what it is like to go to a northern rural school?
- How do your photos describe your school?
- How do your photos describe what you are satisfied/ dissatisfied with at your school?
- What do you need to feel proud of this high school? Does this school have these things? If not, how do you think you could get these?
- What gets in the way of improving student achievement in this school?
- How do your photos capture what helps you or presents you from overcoming barriers to education?
- How do your photos capture the kinds of support for success you have or don't have?
- What else do your photos capture?

Parental/guardian permission

Students who want to participate in this research will need their parents/guardians to give permission to join this study. Students who want to participate but their parents/guardians do not give permission for participation will not participate in this study.

Virtual space and time

COVID19 pandemic has changed the delivery of secondary school. Instead of semesters, most high schools' function under a quadmester with a combination of in-person and remote learning. Therefore, participants will be able to join the virtual orientation, interview and focus groups from home according to their schedule. If their schedule does not permit the participants to be home at the time of the virtual orientation, interview or focus group, I will request a private location in the school for the participant(s) to join in. I do not plan on organizing the virtual orientation, interview or focus groups during class time. They will take place before or after school, or during a break. The total time required from participants is: virtual orientation (30-45 minutes), photovoice (10-150 minutes), virtual interview (45-60 minutes) and virtual focus group (60-90 minutes). The participants will use their own camera phone to take pictures. A point and shoot camera will be provided if the participant does not have a phone.

Withdrawal

Participation in this study is completely voluntary. This means that if, for any reason, participants do not want to finish the questions, or any part of the study, then they don't have to. Also, participants can leave the study at any time without penalty. All photos will belong to the participants. The participant has the right to remove any picture at any time from the research. With the participants' permission I will be including the photos in my doctoral dissertation, which may be published in the future in a scholarly journal of *The Rural Educator by the National Rural Education Association*. However, any future sharing of the photos will require additional permission

Confidentiality and Anonymity

Confidentiality during individual interviews will be upheld, unless there is a safety risk. Confidentiality during the virtual focus group will be encouraged by all group members but not guaranteed. The name of the participating school will be omitted and will be referred to as a school in Northern Ontario. A pseudonym will be used for all participants to enhance anonymity. All connections between actual participants, including references to names, dates, places, and so on will be altered. No photos identifying people can be taken during this study, regardless of permission of the person.

Risks and Benefits Risks

There are no risks to participants greater than those they might encounter in everyday life. In some cases, unfortunate circumstances (i.e. risk of school closure) that arise from conversations may produce emotional reactions. As such, information on local mental health services will be provided and given at the end of each interaction. Overall, this project asks for youth to reflect

on and talk about obstacles and strengths of equitable rural education, and consider these issues through photovoice and conversations, and in visuals they create.

The choice to participate, not participate, or withdraw is not linked to the school, grades or performances. This is voluntary research.

Benefits

The research will enhance the participants' knowledge of photography, research processes and communication skills. Another benefit of this research is the contribution of knowledge to rural educational research. Further, the outcomes of this research may contribute to adapting equity policies to reflect a contextually relevant perspective for geographically isolated schools.

Data Storage

During data collection, I, Tammy Piché, will have access to the data along with my doctoral supervisor, Dr. Seth Agbo. After data collection has been completed, all electronic data will be deleted. Print data including consent letters and copies of photos and their elicitation will be stored at Lakehead University in Thunder Bay, Ontario in a locked cabinet until December 2026.

If you are interested in participating in this study and require further information, please email me at tpiche1@lakeheadu.ca or call me at 8076300488

You may contact the Research Ethics Board (reb@lakeheadu.ca or 905 688 5550 extension 3035) should you have any questions about your rights as a research participant. Please cite the current REB file number: REB **-****PICHE.

Thank you for considering this request.

Yours sincerely,

Tammy Piché, PhD candidate
Faculty of Education
Lakehead University
955 Oliver Rd.
Thunder Bay, Ontario

Appendix J

MY CONSENT:

I have read, and I understand the provided information and have had the opportunity to ask questions about the research project**: Youth Perspectives on Equitable Education in a Northern Rural and Remote Secondary School**

The research study is consistent with the *Ethics Procedures and Guidelines for Humans Subject Research*

I agree to the following:

- ✓ To participate in photovoice, virtual individual interview and virtual focus groups and understand that it will be audiotaped for accuracy.
- ✓ I understand the risks and benefits to the study
- ✓ That I am a volunteer and can withdraw from the study at any time and may choose not to answer any question
- ✓ That the data will be securely stored at Lakehead university for a minimum period of 5 years following completion of the research project
- ✓ I understand that the research findings will be made available to me upon request
- ✓ I will remain anonymous, except when I choose to voluntarily share my photos
- ✓ All my questions have been answered

By consenting to participate, I have not waived any rights to legal recourse in the event of research-related harm.

____ I consent to all the above and I agree to participate

_____ _____

Print name Date

_____

Signature

Please take a picture of this consent and send it to my email at tpiche1@lakeheadu.ca. Thank you.

Appendix K

Dear Potential Participant,

I am inviting you to participate in a research study that I am doing at Geraldton Composite High School (GCHS). My name is Tammy Piché. I am a graduate student in the doctoral program in education Lakehead University in Thunder Bay, Ontario. The title of the study is *Youth Perspectives on Equitable Education in a Northern Rural and Remote Secondary School.*

Purpose

I am interested in understanding rural youths' perspectives on equity and inequity in a northern rural and remote high school, like GCHS; to identify things that prevent you from succeeding in a school that is situated far away from urban cities; and hear from you how you manage you get through school despite challenges along the way. I hope this research will help your teachers, leaders and government understand your experiences of going to school that's far from large urban cities. I believe that you have important information to share and I would be very happy to hear it from you.

What is required of me if I choose to participate?

The total time requested from you if you participate is: virtual orientation (30-45 minutes), photovoice (2 weeks to take 25-30 pictures), virtual interview (45-60 minutes) and virtual focus group (60-90 minutes). Everything will be done at a distance and virtually using Microsoft Teams.

What exactly will the participants be doing?

I will explain the research process during the virtual orientation. I will invite a professional photographer during the orientation to teach you how to take good pictures so that you're proud of them. I will ask you to take 25-30 pictures in a span of two weeks with your phone. You will be given ideas to help you take these photos. Afterwards, you will have a sheet that helps you put into words why each picture is important to you. If you don't have a camera phone, a point and shoot camera will be given to you. Lastly, I will do a virtual individual interview and group conversation about the pictures to understand your point of view.

I have received approval by the Lakehead University Senate Research Ethics Board and by the Superior-Greenstone District School Board. Dr. Seth Agbo, my doctoral committee and I will be the only ones allowed to see the information you give. Your answers to the questions are anonymous. This means that we will not be able to tell which interview responses were yours, but that they are connected to the pictures that you took. For example, you will have a unique code for your pictures, and that same code will be used to identify your interview. Photos will always belong to you. You can decide how your photos are used after they are taken. You have the right to remove any picture at any time from the research.

Can I withdraw from the study at any time?
Participation in this study is completely voluntary. This means that if, for any reason, you do not want to finish taking photos, or any part of the study, then you don't have to. Also, you can leave the study at any time without penalty.

Are there risks and benefits?

I do not expect any risks with you participating in this research. However, I want to make sure you are aware that you can call or text at any time the Kids Help Phone at 1-800-668-6868. They are there to help you in you are in crisis. Also, you can call North of Superior Programs in Geraldton at 807-854-1321 if you want mental health support. Although this service is geared for longer-term counseling and support, there is a crisis staff on call during 8:30am - 4:30pm. Finally, there are school supports, like the graduation coach and child and youth worker, available to you at any time.

The benefits of participating in the research is that you will learn from a photographer how to take pictures, the process of research, and increase communication skills. Another benefit of this research is that you will help add important and missing knowledge to rural educational research.

Confidentiality and Anonymity

I will keep all information you tell me confidential. I can't guarantee that confidentiality in the virtual focus group, but I will encourage everyone to do so. I will boost anonymity by giving a code to everyone so they label their pictures with the code and interviews. I cannot maintain anonymity during the virtual focus group. Therefore, sharing photos is optional during the group conversation. I will alter all connections between actual participants, including references to names, dates, places, and so on. You cannot take pictures of people's faces during the study, regardless if the person gives you permission.

Where will the information be stored and how will it be used?

During data collection, I will have access to the data along with my doctoral supervisor, Dr. Seth Agbo. After data collection has been completed, all electronic and print data will be stored for 5 years. The results of this study will be shared with my doctoral committee. I will be including the photos in my doctoral dissertation. The dissertation may be published in the future in a scholarly journal of *The Rural Educator by the National Rural Education Association*. However, photos will not be used in publications unless the owner of the photo grants permission.

However, any future sharing of the photos will require additional permission. Finally, I will share the results with you and the other participants after the study is completed. If you want a copy of the results, that can be arranged as well. If you want more information about this study or have any questions or concerns please feel free to contact myself or Dr. Agbo.

RESEARCHER CONTACT INFORMATION:

Tammy Piché, PhD candidate
Faculty of Education
Lakehead University
955 Oliver Rd.
Thunder Bay, ON P7B 5E1
tpiche1@lakeheadu.ca

Dr. Seth Agbo
Supervisor and Associate professor
Faculty of Education
Lakehead University (Orillia)
500 University Ave
Orillia, ON L3V 0B9
sagbo@lakeheadu.ca

RESEARCH ETHICS BOARD REVIEW AND APPROVAL:
This research study has been reviewed and approved by the Lakehead University Research Ethics Board. If you have any questions related to the ethics of the research and would like to speak to someone outside of the research team, please contact Sue Wright at the Research Ethics Board at 807-343-8283 or research@lakeheadu.ca.
Yours sincerely:

Tammy Piché