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AN EXPLORATION OF RURAL TEACHER EXPERIENCES

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RESTRICTIVE EDUCATION LEGISLATION

AN EXPLORATION OF RURAL TEACHER EXPERIENCES

A DISSERTATION APPROVED FOR

THE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP AND POLICY STUDIES

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Abstract

Education policy and legislation seeking to restrict what can and cannot be taught in classrooms has increased over the past few years. Scholars theorize that such external censorship may have demoralizing effects on teachers and their teaching. While empirical research has found some evidence that teachers generally feel negatively impacted by restrictive education legislation, little research exists on how rural educators perceive these policies and legislation. Factors unique to rural communities such as perceptions of ineffective government representation and demographic composition may contribute to experiences among rural educators that differ from teachers in urban or suburban contexts. This study seeks to understand the degree to which rural educators feel impacted by restrictive education legislation. For the analysis, this study draws on Santoro's Demoralization framework. Semi-structured interviews with 24 rural educators (3 fringe rural, 9 remote rural, and 12 distant rural) are conducted. This study contributes to existing literature by using qualitative methods to advance knowledge of restrictive education legislation from the perspective of rural educators. It also makes policy suggestions to reduce demoralization among rural teachers and thereby increase retention of rural teachers.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

> *The Indian Citizenship Act of 1924… [is] a really important part of our history here in Oklahoma. We have so many, you know, tribal nations. So many were so tied up in that history our school mascot here in [Town], we're the home of the Indians. We're under the jurisdiction of the absentee [Indigenous] tribe. We're one of 11 schools under their kind of umbrella that fall within their geographical boundaries. We have a lot of good partnerships with them and support from them and have had good relationships with them. So it's important that we talk about that and the accurate history, but those spoken policies, those understood policies at a level outside of my district makes talking about that very scary, even though that's the right thing to do. It's, the right way to teach our history is 'These are the facts'. We're not being biased. The fact is this was wrong, and we can be okay with that and move on and just say that was wrong. We shouldn't do that again, but it's terrifying because I don't know what they're going to say when they go home to mom or dad or, you know, if we send home the graded worksheet and mom or dad see it. What are they going to think? What are they going to say? There's just a lot of, a lot of fear wrapped up in it, but it's all from, for me, I would say all of that is fear of policies or spoken policies or promises outside of my district. (Participant 20)*

Since the establishment of political parties in the United States, American politics have often been divided on key issues (Mayhew, 2005). Most recently, the United States has become increasingly divided in what are being called "culture wars" (Donnelly, 2024). Researchers have recognized much of the rhetoric used during the 2016 presidential campaign by candidates and other popular figures to revolve around race and gender issues (Kusz, 2020). During this time, media coverage increased highlighting the ways that Black Americans are disproportionately victimized through racial bias, police violence, and killings in the United States (United States Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2015). Out of these experiences, the Black Lives Matter movement gained traction (Kelly et al., 2020).

Today, these issues are far from a place of resolution or conclusion (Snider, 2024). In fact, these issues have spread and now proliferate numerous areas of American life including public education (Carvalho et al., 2024). Over the past four years, more than 44 states have either introduced bills or taken other steps that would censor the teaching or discussion of race and

gender related issues in public school classrooms (Maye & Sherer, 2023; Schwartz, 2021; Stout & Wilburn, 2022). Of those states, 22 have followed through with imposing bans and restrictions on these topics in classrooms by voting them into law or through other options like executive orders (Benitez et al., 2025; Schwartz, 2021). Popular examples of these legislation include Florida's HB1557, the Parental Rights in Education act and Oklahoma's HB 1775. Both of these have been colloquially called other names like the "Don't Say Gay" bill or the "CRT" bill to indicate how certain gender and race related topics are off-limits in the curriculum (Goldberg et al., 2024; Hill, 2022). As much as politicians are divided on these policies and legislation, families are similarly divided, exacerbating the issue (Horowitz, 2022).

Theoretical Links

While teacher burnout is well represented in the literature as a contributing cause for some teachers to leave the profession, it does not explain why experienced teachers who are able to manage the stresses of teaching for many years with plans to teach long term seem to quit, sometimes quite suddenly. Santoro has made a much needed distinction to help explain the issue. According to Santoro (2011), there is a difference between teacher burnout "where individual teachers' personal resources cannot meet the challenge of the difficulties presented by the work" verses demoralization, which "happens when experienced teachers who are fueled by the moral dimension of teaching find that they can no longer access the moral rewards embedded in the work" (2-3). This distinction provides much needed language for teachers and administrators to more accurately describe the tensions faced by educators with the potential for helpful interventions.

Mixed Perceptions of Policies

Empirical research into the effects of these policies is still fairly new (Feingold, 2021). Some data has been gathered demonstrating mixed perceptions of these policies by the general public (Lin et al., 2024; Polikoff et. al., 2022) and by teachers (Woo et. al., 2023), but little research exists to capture the voices of teachers working under these new policies and legislation. Anecdotally, Kurt Russell, 2022's National Teacher of the Year, has reported speaking to teachers across the country on this issue. According to Russell, many teachers he has spoken to are feeling the effects of divisive concept bills and fear repercussions that may result (Scwartz, 2023).

Since the phenomena of these policies and legislation is still so recent, scholars have not had many opportunities yet to research the situation. Numerous news outlets are easily found to promote various sides of these policies, but few peer reviewed studies are available. For example, Polikoff et. al. (2022) utilized data from the Understanding America Survey, which has been around for years and surveys thousands of people, but this survey only captures perceptions that American adults have about teachers and classrooms. The PEW Research Center also surveyed US Adults who are parents of at least one child under the age of 18 about these divisive policies to ultimately determine there was "no consensus among parents about what they want their children to learn about gender identity or slavery"; however, results tend to align with political party stances (Horowitz, 2022). The perceptions of teachers were not measured in either of these surveys.

Another example that is more focused on the experiences of educators is the American Instructional Resources Survey (AIRS), which is analyzed by Woo et. al., (2023) with the Rand Corporation. This report provides quantitative data supporting conclusions that teachers are

impacted by restrictive education legislation; yet, their findings are not conclusive and do not capture several specific factors. The report argues that teachers are impacted, but it does not say why teachers give inconsistent responses within states where teachers ought to have similar experiences. The report does not explain to what extent, if any, these policies and legislation are impacting instruction or just the teachers. And, most importantly for this current study, the report does not describe with qualitative data specific to the population contexts in which teachers are employed, lived experiences. In other words, the report does not explain how rural teachers are experiencing restrictive education legislation.

Current gaps in the literature capturing the experiences of rural educators is needed because their perceptions tend to be lost when gathered in larger samples including urban and suburban respondents. Since rural communities tend to vote more conservatively, it is easy to assume that teachers in rural communities would support the policies of the republican party (Stout & Wilburn, 2022). However, the situation may be more nuanced than this. In recent years, the democratic party has been the political force in favor of increased funding for educational programs and tends to believe in the effectiveness of schools (Horowitz, 2022). Thus, rural educators are often torn between conflicting interests. Furthermore, rural educators tend to dismiss state and federal government policies as irrelevant regarding the best interests of their communities (Budge, 2010). For these reasons, the perceptions of rural educators are a scholarly gap worth exploring.

Purpose & Research Question

The purpose of this study is to gather the experiences of rural educators regarding the phenomena of restrictive education legislation. This research seeks to describe how rural teachers perceive the impact of restrictive education legislation like Florida's HB7, Kentucky's

SB1, or Oklahoma's HB1775, and to use Santoro's Demoralization construct as a lens to interpret the research findings. The primary research question to be explored in this study is:

Research Question 1. *For rural educators who believe they are impacted by restrictive education legislation, how do they describe their experiences?*
Research Question 2. *For rural educators who do not believe they are impacted by restrictive education legislation, what reasons are described for the lack of impact?*

Ultimately, this study seeks to know whether the experiences of these rural teachers ought to be informing legislative or policy decisions. To understand the experiences of teachers better, a qualitative research design was used. 24 semi-structured interviews were conducted to address this study's research question.

Study Contributions and Limitations

In addition to the descriptive nature of this study, teacher preparation programs and school leaders need to be aware of the real lived experiences of teachers amid barriers in education. This knowledge can inform school administrators as they facilitate the professional development of new and tenured teachers, which is widely seen as a healthy strategy of retaining teachers in the profession (Bland et al., 2016, p. 5). This knowledge can also inform teacher preparation programs who must strike a healthy balance between providing preservice teachers opportunities to develop their moral identities as well as to be equipped with necessary practical skills (Amini et al., 2020).

This study contains several key limitations. While Oklahoma provides a robust selection of rural communities from which to sample, the experience of rural Oklahoma teachers cannot be generalized to represent every rural community everywhere. Furthermore, this study did not seek to group interviews beyond the initial sub categories of rural fringe, rural remote, and rural distant. Teachers are not a monolithic group and may vary in their dispositions depending on background and context. Future research may find it useful to capture the lived experiences of

rural teachers across subject areas taught or to be more intentional regarding differentiating background characteristics.

Overview

This dissertation is divided into six chapters. The first three chapters provide the necessary background. Chapters two and three detail the theoretical framework and the empirical research supporting this current study. The coming chapters describe the gap in the existing literature and how the research may advance further understanding of rural teacher experiences. Chapter four presents the qualitative research methods and summarizes data sources, participants, interview protocol, and analysis. Chapter five reviews findings and groups them into major themes and sub themes. Theme 1: Minimal or Lack of Experience with Restrictive Education Legislation is by far the theme with the most data, which is why it is best understood by its separation into six sub themes: Sub Theme 1: Administrative Support Variability, Sub Theme 2: Community Values Override Legislation, Sub Theme 3: Practical Education Concerns Outweigh Policy, Sub Theme 4: Professional Identity Preservation, Sub Theme 5: Political Views, and Sub Theme 6: Context. Following the first theme is Theme 2: Negative Experience with Restrictive Education Legislation, which is delineated into two sub themes: Sub Theme 1: Fear, Uncertainty, and Self-Censorship and Sub Theme 2: Resistance. Lastly, the findings chapter ends with a final theme: Theme 3: Positive Experience with Restrictive Education Legislation and its sub theme Sub Theme 1: Agree with HB1775. Chapter six concludes the study and includes a discussion of findings, limitations, strengths of the study, potential contributions that advance the existing literature, and recommendations for future research.

Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework & Literature Review

Concern over teachers leaving the profession in alarming numbers is not new; in one study four decades ago, 40% of respondents were considering leaving the profession (Henderson, 1984). These numbers have not improved. By the early 2000s, these numbers became true (National Center for Education Statistics, 2004). These data spurred a new wave of researchers to investigate the reasons teachers are leaving, which lead to various findings. While significant progress has been made in the literature to understand how burnout among teachers may be contributing to the teacher attrition problem, the work of Doris Santoro distinguishes between demoralization and burnout as a potential alternative factor affecting teachers who leave the profession.

Theoretical Framework

Doris Santoro has been cultivating for nearly two decades an alternative theory to explain why teachers may be leaving the profession besides what burnout suggests. This is not to say that burnout fails to explain the experiences of many current and former teachers, but Santoro's work with her construct of teacher demoralization captures an element of teacher attrition largely missing from the literature. In 2006, Santoro had an interaction with a colleague who was choosing to leave the teaching profession, not because she was experiencing burnout, but because she refused to teach amid unignorable factors (Santoro, 2021). This interaction led to a qualitative study, which helped Santoro begin identifying teachers who she began to describe as "conscientious objectors to teaching" (Santoro & Morehouse, 2011). These interviews led Santoro to notice a difference among teachers who refused to be implicated in practices they saw to denigrate the profession or to harm students (Santoro, 2021). Out of this initial study came Santoro's construct of demoralization. What follows is a detailed exposition of the ethics from

which this theory has developed, how the literature defines "good teaching", the theory's key components, how demoralization differs from burnout, why it matters to education professionals, and how it can help researchers interpret teacher experiences.

Virtue Ethics

The severity of the global teacher attrition problem has never been more thoroughly supported in the literature (Cells et al., 2023, p. 345; Karsenti & Collin, 2013; Santoro, 2011, p. 2; Worth & Faulkner-Ellis, 2021, p. 18; Zhang & Zeller, 2016). In addition to recruitment issue, the current teacher attrition crisis would not be so worrisome if the profession was not hemorrhaging educators. Practically for policymakers and district leaders, more attention needs to be devoted to teacher retention (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017; Ingersoll, 2001). However, before educational leaders can implement effective retention strategies, they need a clear understanding of why people choose to enter the profession at all in order to ensure teachers are receiving what they need and want.

Historically, altruism has been attributed as the default motivation for people to become teachers (Alexander et al., 1996). In fact, one study from the 1980s concluded that "there may be few reasons for considering the teaching profession except the altruistic motive" (Joseph & Green, 1986, p. 31). Simple reflection reveals the over simplicity of this finding. People may enter the profession for purely external motivations including salary, status, or working conditions (Balyer & Özcan, 2014). Others may choose to enter the profession for reasons intrinsic to the profession such as passion for teaching or passion for the subject area (Bergmark et al., 2018). Some teachers may have been inspired to teach by someone they know or by religious beliefs (Balyer & Özcan, 2014). And still yet, people may enter the profession for altruistic reasons such as the desire to help children or to make the world a better place (Balyer &

Özcan, 2014; Bergmark et al., 2018). Sociologist Daniel Lortie framed altruistic motives as "normative commitments" that manifested as norms of "client responsibility" and norms of "craft performance"; examples of these will receive more attention later (Lortie, 1967). Objectively, all three categories of motives to enter the teaching profession may or may not be valid, but altruistic motivation has clear connections to the demoralization framework.

Santoro's demoralization and responsive remoralization concepts add powerful knowledge to the literature for leaders attempting to reduce teacher attrition, but it is admittedly limited. No amount of demoralization or remoralization will affect a teacher who is leaving the profession because of extrinsic reasons such as the insufficiency of salary. Nor will understanding demoralization translate broadly across schools because a teacher who is intrinsically motivated by their subject matter and are no longer permitted to teach a beloved course due to reduced student enrollment. Therefore, Santoro's work is not aiming to retain teachers who entered the profession for purely intrinsic motives or is exiting purely for external motives. Instead, Santoro's demoralization construct helps researchers and education leaders understand why those who are most dedicated to helping children and to maintaining the integrity of the profession are leaving their jobs. For them, though they may not use these words, the possibility of demoralization is a deeply existential threat.

The application of a demoralization theory for understanding peoples' experiences is more common in fields of medicine and hereby elevates the severity of applying demoralization as a descriptor for educators. "Demoralization refers to a state in which there is a perceived inability to cope, that is associated with a sense of dis-heartenment and a loss of hope and meaning" (Vehling et. al., 2017, p. 3394). As such, "demoralization has been the subject of discussion in relation to end-of-life care. It is characterized by hopelessness and helplessness due

to a loss of purpose and meaning" (Robinson, 2014, p. 1). When demoralization is connected to human mortality and the meaning of life, then the theory of demoralization touches on the existential. Ultimately, feelings of meaninglessness are derived from the utmost existential stress (Yalom, 1980). Seen in this way, Santoro's theory of demoralization moves past teacher burnout. Although teacher burnout is still a serious matter, it ultimately becomes a problem of internal resource and stress management, which is fundamentally different from the existential crisis teachers may experience when factors outside their control prevent access to that which gives life meaning (Lesko, 2023).

Santoro has since developed her theory of demoralization further by introducing concepts of "good teaching" and "integrity". Teachers who seek the moral rewards of teaching can generally be lumped together as desiring to participate in "good teaching", which is often fueled by the impetus to preserve personal and professional integrity (Santoro, 2013).

Before researchers and school leaders can utilize Santoro's demoralization construct, they must first have at least a cursory understanding of the virtue ethics that undergird Santoro's theory; the easiest place to begin is with the reality of teacher dissatisfaction. According to Santoro, teacher dissatisfaction tends to originate from a lack of fulfillment of external and internal motivations, which are inherently selfish, or altruistic motivations, which must characteristically be for the benefit of others. This initial distinction dates back to the virtue ethics project attributed to Socrates through the writings of Plato. This ancient philosophical project has come in and out of fashion, but it has recently experienced a resurgence in popularity as the foundation of relatively new projects such as care ethics (Noddings, 1995; Rabin, 2019) and teacher demoralization.

In *Republic*, Socrates introduces an example of a successful doctor and a question about their motive to successfully fulfill the duties of medicine. It is reasonable to understand that a doctor who is good at healing people can be simultaneously doing the work for the altruistic motive of helping people as well as the external motive of payment; however, this successful doctor may not be outwardly distinguishable from another successful doctor who only heals people for the external motive of payment. This helps establish a distinction between a doctor who is merely good at his profession and the other who is genuinely a good doctor.

The difference between these two hypothetical doctors only makes sense under the assumption that there is more to life than doing good; thus, one of Socrates's most famous maxims arises, "not life, but good life, is to be chiefly valued" (Grube, 1992). According to the virtue ethics tradition, that which constitutes the good life is reason, virtue, and moral principles (Grube, 1992). Said another way, if the goal of living is to live the good life, then one must be guided by reason, be virtuous, and moral. This supports the argument that the doctor who is proficient at healing people because of the payment received is not truly a good doctor. Rather, for Socrates and Plato, true virtue is knowing what is good and acting accordingly. This belief weds the two concepts of being good and the motives that drive action. Since self-examination is the only way to judge motive, the measurement of good living can only be self-determined. The private and individual nature of this self-judgment also means that people may feel differently about a commonly experienced action on a moral level.

At the core of Santoro's work is the same question that Socrates entertained thousands of years ago: how do I live the good life? For teachers who have entered the profession for altruistic reasons, the question becomes: how do I do good teaching? The example of the doctor that Socrates used holds up well when adapted to the work of an educator today. A teacher who

effectively educates students may do the work for extrinsic reasons (a paycheck), for intrinsic reasons (a passion for Shakespearean literature), or for altruistic reasons (a desire to better the world). It is impossible to assuredly know the true motivation of another individual, only self-examination can do this. This has been seen as a weakness of virtue ethics (Koehn, 1998). Plato era virtue ethics are insufficient as a tool to judge the goodness of other people's motives. Furthermore, Socrates posited his concept of forms, which are perfect, abstract ideals that exist and are the ideals to which people are striving when they attempt to be good. This concept is genius as an ideal for which people may strive, but it can be a poison to humanity since perfect understanding of forms is unknowable and people began to suspect that there was no single best way to live (De Montaigne, 1965). This is ultimately what drove philosophers to turn to projects other than Plato's original work; however, it also reveals the necessity for Santoro's demoralization work.

"Good Teaching"

Since altruism is inherently virtuous in the sense that a good work is done for the benefit of some other person, and since research shows that some number of teachers enter the profession for altruistic reasons, then understanding the experiences of teachers who value the impetus to participate in good teaching is of critical value for researchers and educational leaders. This opens up several areas of possible confusion. If good teaching is an abstract ideal, is its interpretation relative to opinions and contexts, or another way, is that which constitutes good teaching knowable? While effective learning can be used to judge the effectiveness of a teacher, can a good teacher only be determined through self-examination? Santoro builds her work understanding demoralization on the work conducted by Fenstermacher & Richardson distinguishing successful teaching from good teaching (2005).

According to Fenstermacher & Richardson (2005), there is more to good teaching than clear delivery of information. In the English language, a semantic distinction is made between task and achievement in a variety of situations. For example, one may hunt for their car keys (the task), but they may or may not find their keys (the achievement). Likewise, an educator may teach content (the task), which is separate from the act of learning done by students (the achievement). This matters when teaching is judged to be good or bad. A teacher who yields high levels of learning among students by threatening violence would hardly be described by society to be participating in good teaching even though the teacher's practice may be considered effective teaching. In contrast, a teacher who is dedicated to treating students with love and kindness but doesn't help students learn appropriate class content could be identified as a good teacher but not an effective teacher (Fenstermacher & Richardson, 2005). Once again, morality is inseparable from in depth understandings of pedagogy and the experiences teachers have working with students.

Santoro's Demoralization Construct

In light of the classical virtue ethics project grounded in Socrates as well as modern adaptations to understand what constitutes good teaching, Santoro positions her theories of demoralization. First, some teachers enter the profession for altruistic reasons such as the betterment of the world or the betterment of the profession. Second, for these teachers, some degree of concern is given to fulfilling these altruistic motivations in a way that is self-determined to be good, and importantly, this assessment of good teaching is separate from effective teaching. Building on these two ideas, Santoro reconciles the ideas of moral discomfort may result for altruistically driven teachers who must carry out teaching that is not considered good teaching, or said another way, some number of educators remain in the profession for

altruistic reasons so long as they are able to access a moral reward for their efforts (Santoro, 2011).

Suppose a teacher, who by all socially determined metrics, is a quality teacher as defined by Fenstermacher & Richardson (2005). This teacher not only insures students learn through effective teaching, but also maintains standards of good teaching that "includ[e] content in accordance with disciplinary standards of adequacy and completeness, and that the methods employed are age appropriate, morally defensible, and undertaken with the intention of enhancing the learner's competence with respect to the content studied" (Fenstermacher and Richardson, 2005, p. 6). This particular teacher is altruistically motivated to do good teaching because they believe in the transformative power of education to improve the lives of children. Now suppose an external factor interferes with the work of this teacher. A governing body has intervened with policy that mandates a less rigorous curriculum in accordance with the preferences of students and their guardians. This teacher is now faced with a conundrum: ignore the new expectations in favor of maintaining the principles of good teaching or capitulate with the new expectations and partake in a practice that is less than what good teaching requires and thereby forfeit the moral rewards of the profession that sustain the teacher.

This scenario is not theoretical; it is merely one of the lived experiences Santoro captured with her research that helped her identify demoralization among teachers (2021). The above teacher's experience is a poignant illustration of what can demoralize teachers especially because of how minor the situation may seem. Another teacher may have no issue with this policy or may be participating in worse practices with no moral qualms. Therefore, like Socrates was unable to elucidate a comprehensive rubric of his ideal forms, Santoro's project is unable to provide a comprehensive list of all the mandates that will demoralize teachers for legislators and school

leaders to consult. Obviously, certain education mandates would require no scrutiny to predict that teachers would resist them from morally founded platforms; however, education is flush with legislation and policy that were written without adequate foresight predicting resultant moral fallout. For example, Once "A Nation at Risk" (1983) was issued arguing that America's education system was in decline, a steady march proceeded to determining mastery standards of learning, which later led to No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and federally defined consequences for schools who failed to educate students to mastery of standards (Meisler & Gerstenzang, 1989). Several negative consequences of these policies have since been revealed. For example, since the stakes were higher for schools, teachers were incentivized to drill basic skills associated with what is most essential while abandoning other contents of the curriculum deemed less critical (Berliner, 2011; Schoen & Fusarelli, 2008). NCLB was not written with the intention of narrowing the focus of school curriculum, but this was undoubtedly a result nonetheless. Researchers have investigated this exact phenomena to measure the degree to which NCLB contributed to the demoralization of teachers (Wronowski & Urick, 2021).

This series of events, on paper, seems like a way for schools to be held accountable for ensuring students receive good teaching; however, a brief return to Plato's virtue ethics reveals a logical problem. For the externally or internally motivated teacher, the accountability outlined by NCLB makes sense. Much like the argument put forth by Thrasymachus to Socrates that people would rather be unjust because it is more profitable, it is likely true that some number of teachers today improved their teaching practices because of the increased pressures of NCLB. However, as previously argued, many teachers are not driven to be good teachers because of external or internal motives; rather, they are driven by altruistic reasons, or in the words of Socrates, driven by the pursuit of the good life. Teachers who are motivated by altruism are already attempting to

fulfill their own versions of what Fenstermacher and Richardson (2005) outlined as good teaching. For these teachers, legislation like NCLB fails to improve the education students are receiving and alternatively increases restrictions on the very educators who are already attempting to do good teaching to the best of their ability.

For the educator who teaches for altruistic reasons, losing access to those reasons is significant. In fact, Santoro would say "the process of demoralization occurs when pedagogical policies and school practices (such as high-stakes testing, mandated curriculum, and merit pay for teachers) threaten the ideals and values, the moral center, teachers bring to their work" (2021). This is where Santoro's work begins to come together. To the good and successful teacher who is altruistically minded, self-examination is a familiar exercise. This teacher is already accustomed to consulting a moral center as a way to gauge proximity to the altruistic ideals driving them. Furthermore, this teacher is less likely to leave the profession due to a lack of resolve. Instead this teacher has experienced at a moral level what makes the profession good and now struggles with the loss or the potential loss of continued access to that payoff. In other words, for those who have moralized experiences teaching, the threat of demoralization is significant.

Potential Application

Others have since built on this theory. In 2021, researchers examined teacher perceptions of school performance accountability measures connected to No Child Left Behind (Wronowski & Urick). The findings of this study support the conclusion that teacher perceptions of demoralization during the era of accountability policy from the 1990s to the late 2000s had increased (Wronowski & Urick, 2021). This study is a recent publication and is not represented in the conceptual framework by Nguyen et al. (2019); however, its findings continue to support

the conclusion that external factors are a reason that some teachers leave the profession. It also connects the findings of numerous studies to the theoretical work of Santoro. If teachers experienced demoralization from accountability policies in the 1990s and 2000s, then it is reasonable to apply Santoro's theory to the restrictive education legislation teachers are experiencing now.

Literature Review

The history of race in the United States is an important yet difficult topic to appropriately unpack (Martell & Stevens, 2017). America's historically accepted practice of enslaving people may have ended in the 19th century, but the end of violence toward people of color and by extension racial justice has yet to be achieved (Shilliam & Spence, 2025). Progress has occurred in small, difficult to measure instances as well as through landmark leaps such as the formally recognized civil rights movement of the 1960s (Ware, 2012). Another such historical advance gained national attention in 2020 through the combination of federal legislation and civilian cell phone recordings (Robinson & Page, 2021). In February of that year, the United States House of Representatives passed the Emmett Till Antilynching Act seeking to amend section 249 of title 18, United States Code (USC), to specify lynching as a hate crime, which would not become law until two years later (Hate Crimes Prevention Act, 2009). In March, media outlets widely covered the murder of Breonna Taylor by police officers. Later in May of 2020, the murder of George Floyd by a police officer in response to a nonviolent crime reached national recognition through unmistakable cell phone footage by onlookers (Dreyer et al., 2020). Even though violence against BIPOC had existed since before this nation's founding, 2020 seemed like the year new civil rights progress would be made. For example, the Black Lives Matter movement was founded in 2013 in response to George Zimmerman's acquittal of Trayvon Martin's murder; however, the organization did not reach national recognition until 2020 through partnerships

with big corporations like NIKE in June (Johnson, 2021; *NIKE, Inc. 2023 Black Community Commitment Grantees - NIKE, Inc.*, 2023).

This seemingly unstoppable march toward a new standard of racial justice was met by an equally dedicated resistance beginning with a single conservative activist. In September of 2020, Christopher Rufo appeared on Fox News with Tucker Carlson claiming that Critical Race Theory (CRT) is an "existential threat to the United States" and called on president Trump to issue an executive order "to stamp out this destructive, divisive, pseudoscientific ideology" (Alexander et al., 2023). Later that month, President Trump signed Executive Order 13950 titled "Combating Race and Sex Stereotyping" in which federal agencies were not allowed to "teach, instruct, or train" employees "to believe any of the divisive concepts" previously outlined in the executive order (Executive Office of the President, 2020). Several of the divisive concepts listed seem objectively reasonable, such as "(1) one race or sex is inherently superior to another race or sex" (Executive Office of the President, 2020). However, the context surrounding the executive order itself combined with the common language found within CRT scholarship left no ambiguity that this executive order was a direct attack on the civil rights progress from earlier in the summer of 2020.

Executive Order 13950 was soon rescinded in January 2021 by President Biden (Executive Office of the President, 2021), and Christopher Rufo admitted in March of 2021 that his appearance on Fox News was less about critiquing CRT and more about political strategy (Beauchamp, 2023). Regardless, the language of Trump's executive order became the foundation language used by the flurry of think tanks and activist groups whose purpose is to promulgate the conservative party's agenda and introduce clear limits or restrictions on the education of race and gender (Alexander et al., 2023; Pollock, 2023). Since January of 2021, roughly 800 laws have

been introduced by federal, state, and local government officials with the purpose of restricting the degrees to which race and gender can be discussed in public schools (Alexander et al., 2023; Friedman & Tager).

Three important notes of clarification: (1) a key term needs to be defined and will be frequently used throughout this piece, (2) what is not discussed in this paper, and (3) CRT defined. First, since the phenomena of legislation flowing from Executive Order 13950 is still so new, several terms have been used to represent these policies, laws, executive orders, etc. Therefore, this paper will use the term "restrictive education legislation" to encapsulate what has been called "backlash bills," "anti-literacy laws," "anti-CRT laws," "discriminatory censorship laws," and "educational gag orders" in other publications to mean "certain official acts that regulate classroom instruction on racism, gender identity, and other topics" (Feingold, 2022; Feingold & Weishart, 2023; Russell-Brown, 2022; Friedman & Tager). The term "restrictive education legislation" has been selected for this study as it is the least politically biased term available. Right or wrong, the discussed laws are legislation affecting education by restricting what can and cannot be said or taught.

Second, the phenomenon of public education censorship laws in the US is not new. For example, judicial actions seeking to regulate or censor the teaching of evolution in public schools dates back to the 1920s (Brake, 2023; Wilhelm, 1978). More recently, the school board of the Tucson Unified School District put an end to the Mexican American Studies Department in Tucson in 2010 (Acosta, 2014). Legislative events like this undeniably fit within the adopted definition of restrictive education legislation; however, for the purposes of focusing this paper, restrictive education legislation will refer to legislative actions since Executive Order 13950.

Third, a basic understanding of Critical Race Theory (CRT) is mandatory for the following discussion. Essentially, CRT is an academic theory that purports that racism may be present in government systems and policy (Crenshaw et al., 1995). CRT can be a useful lens through which systems can be examined for hidden inequities. Beginning as a legal concept, it was not until Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) applied CRT to educational contexts (Kim, 2021). Note, this does not mean CRT was taught in K-12 schools; rather, educational leaders could apply CRT to ensure policies persisting from years passed were not inadvertently favoring some students over another. For example, a school dress code may prohibit hair picks from being worn by students without asking the reason for this policy. CRT might cause administrators to realize that hairpicks are more culturally related to one racial group of students over other racial groups. Therefore, a ban on hairpicks is potentially targeting, either intentionally or unintentionally, a particular student demographic. Once this is realized, policy can be reevaluated and potentially changed. Nowhere in any of this process has CRT been taught to students. Through the following discussion, divisive concepts will be referred to frequently. Rather than repeat them, Table 2 details the 10 most common prohibited concepts with derivations originating in CRT located in restrictive education legislation.

Table 1

Most Common Prohibited Concepts in Recent Restrictive Education Legislation

1. One race is inherently superior to another. (14 states)
2. An individual, by virtue of their race, bears responsibility for actions committed in the past by members of the same race. (14 states)
3. An individual should be discriminated against on account of race. (13 states)
4. An individual's moral character is determined by their race. (13 states)
5. An individual, by virtue of race, is inherently privileged, racist, sexist, or oppressive, whether consciously or subconsciously. (11 states)
6. A meritocracy is racist. (11 states)
7. An individual should feel discomfort, guilt, anguish, or psychological distress solely because of their race. (10 states)
8. This state or the United States is fundamentally or irredeemably racist. (6 states)

9. Character traits, values, morals, privileges, or beliefs can be ascribed to someone based on their race. (5 states)
10. People cannot treat each other without respect to race. (5 states)

(Friedman & Tager; Kelly, 2023)

According to the media, hundreds of anti-CRT bills have been introduced in state legislatures (Ray & Gibbons, 2022; Hess, 2021). However, these laws are not worded clearly enough to be read as censoring or enforcing the same concepts, resources, and actions in the same ways. This lack of clarity is causing large disparities between interpretations by practitioners, community members, and the media of what these laws allow or disallow. Some argue this lack of clarity is the intended goal of these restrictive education legislation as they "chill" conversations surrounding race and gender in public school classrooms (Feingold, 2021). As a result, it is reasonable to argue that educators, the people responsible for fulfilling the requirements of these laws, will find themselves caught in the middle of a deeply contested political conflict, a conflict that simply might make the job undesirable enough to leave the profession.

To bring clarity to this difficult to navigate space, the following sections will explore what is known about restrictive education legislation from the national, state, and local levels. Since a majority of these laws have been passed at the state level, the bulk of this review will reside there. Since the Democratic party controlled the US senate and presidency from January 2021 until November 2024, none of the proposed restrictive education legislation at the national level have been voted into law (Feingold & Weishart, 2023). Since 2024, the US Congress has not prioritized CRT in bills or laws.

National

As stated above, President Trump's Executive Order 13950 is the most important discriminatory censorship law at the national level because of its role as a catalyst for all the other state and local level laws on this topic. Furthermore, some research suggests it is also representative of a larger movement to promulgate conflict between Americans on a variety of cultural issues with the purpose of political gain (Pollock et al., 2023). This work suggests that the fears articulated in Trump's executive order are less about protecting people from a legitimate threat and more about providing a contrived threat about which conservative politicians can campaign against.

State & Local

As of this writing, 783 restrictive education legislation have been introduced by government officials from all levels of government (Alexander, 2023; Friedman & Tager). Of those laws introduced, more than 500 laws affect K-12 contexts, and of those K-12 laws, 370 censor classroom teaching and 380 censor classroom materials (Alexander, 2023). Many of these laws affect both teaching and materials. Even though all of these laws use similar language to censor teaching and materials, the specific language designating what behavior is prohibited fall into three main categories: laws that prohibit teachers from *promoting* concepts, laws that prohibit teachers from *compelling* students to "adopt, affirm, or espouse" certain ideas, and laws that prohibit teachers from *including* concepts (Feingold & Weishart, 2023; Kelly, 2023; Young & Friedman, 2022). Each discriminatory censorship law may or may not fall exclusively into one of these three categories. The examples provided are selected to demonstrate examples of these three primary censorship categories rather than attempt to create a clear categorization of the laws. The following sections will explore current state and local laws through the lens of these three prohibition types along with relevant scholarly literature.

Prohibited From Promoting Concepts

The state bills least likely to become law fall into this category, but this does not mean legislators are discouraged from introducing bills worded in this way (Friedman & Tager). West Virginia's SB45, Utah's HB428, and Florida's HB7 are clear examples of restrictive education legislation that merely prohibit educators from promoting certain divisive concepts; however, Florida's bill is the only state bill so far that has been voted into law (Friedman & Tager).

West Virginia's SB45 would have restricted K-12 schools, state agencies, and state contractors from using materials that *promote* certain ideas related to race or sex (Friedman & Tager; West Virginia SB45). This bill focused on censoring teaching materials instead of censoring what was taught in classrooms. In contrast, Utah's HB428 sought to prohibit employers of public and private schools from requiring individuals be subjected to any instruction or training that *promotes* or espouses certain ideas related to race, color, sex, or national origin as a condition of employment, credentialing, or passing an examination (Friedman & Tager; Utah HB 28). Unlike the West Virginia bill that specified censorship of materials, Utah's bill targeted instruction and training. Regardless, both bills attempted to hinder the promotion of divisive concepts. Since neither of these bills became law, little or no scholarship exists discussing these bills.

Ironically, despite the lack of success most of these bills experience, Florida's HB7 is perhaps the most nationally recognized restrictive education bill. While this bill is more commonly known as the "Stop WOKE Act", the language of this law does not stop what people tend to think it does (Feingold & Weishart, 2023). For example, like many of these laws, HB7 has a list of specified concepts that are the focus of the legislation such as "Members of one race, color, national origin, or sex are morally superior to members of another race, color, national

origin, or sex" (Florida HB7). The prohibitive language of this bill states that educators cannot promote this concept. If this is to be taken literally, then an educator might be inclined to believe that it is their duty to teach Diversity, Equity, and Inclusionary (DEI) concepts with the goal of fulfilling HB7's mandate (Feingold, 2021; Russell-Brown, 2022). At the very least, this law should be understood as one that allows for the unbiased teaching of the included divisive concepts in classrooms; yet, this has not been the national narrative surrounding this law, nor was it the intent as made clear by the law's other name, "Stop WOKE Act".

Florida's HB7 also serves as a clear example of why these restrictive education legislation may be so harmful to those who are responsible for fulfilling them. When examined closely, HB7 prohibits the promotion of specific concepts; meanwhile, state legislators and media reporters on both political sides explain the law as prohibiting the inclusion of concepts. It is easy for a climate of uncertainty and fear to foster when those in societal positions of voice and power make differing claims about what is and is not allowed in schools (Kim, 2021).

Prohibited From Compelling Adoption, Affirmation, or Espousal

While the language of several introduced restrictive education laws merely prohibit the promotion of divisive concepts, many more laws go further by prohibiting educators from indoctrinating students. Examples of these laws include, but are not limited to Mississippi's SB2113, Idaho's HB377, and New Hampshire's HB544, which was modified and added to HB2. Like the previous section of this review, the goal is not to establish an exhaustive list of this particular subsect of restrictive education legislation; rather, the purpose is to illustrate how these laws differ from other similar laws despite common misunderstanding. Furthermore, the nature of these laws tend to focus on censoring the teacher rather than censoring materials since the language of these bills prohibit educators from compelling adoption, affirmation, or espousal; the

perceived threat of indoctrination is easier to conceive as originating from a teacher than from materials alone.

Mississippi's SB2113 and Idaho's HB377 are clear examples of restrictive education legislation focused on banning indoctrination. Specifically, these two laws prohibit public schools and institutions from compelling students to affirm or adopt certain ideas related to race, sex, religion, or national origin for the former law and from compelling student to affirm, adopt or adhere to the outlined CRT tenets in the latter law (Friedman & Tager; Idaho HB377; Mississippi SB2113). New Hampshire's HB544 that was rolled into HB2 functions similarly to these other two bills, but it feels separate. Since this bill was an addition to a budgetary bill, the restrictions are more focused on work places and government programs where teaching, advocating, or advancing certain concepts is prohibited (Friedman & Tager; New Hampshire HB2). Regardless, these three laws are protecting people from the more aggressive fear of people attempting to change others' beliefs.

One notable feature of these laws is the target of censorship. Even though schools are organizations composed of people, the language of Idaho's HB377 and Mississippi's SB2113 specify schools rather than targeting teachers unlike other restrictive education legislation. This may or may not indicate a distrust for the public school institution as opposed to a distrust in individual teachers accused of pursuing a personal agenda (Batker & Turpin, 2024).

Another notable feature regards the language used to specify which ideas are targeted. New Hampshire's HB2 explicitly states many concepts that should not be forced on others such as the superiority of any: age, sex, gender identity, sexual orientation, race, creed, color, marital status, familial status, mental or physical disability, religion or national origin (New Hampshire HB2). Mississippi's SB2113 is far more focused as it only prohibits compelling adoption of

ideas related to race, sex, religion, or national origin. And Idaho's HB377 is even more focused as it prohibits compelling adoption of the outlined "Critical Race Theory" tenets. In another time in US history like the 1950s, one might expect a ban on communist ideas to be among the listed ideas (Nelson & Hahn, 2010). This is because post World War II Russia was perceived as a global threat, and their government's communistic principles were seen as a threat to root out and legally ban. While New Hampshire's HB2 includes several of the CRT concepts present in other restrictive education legislation, it also contains concepts absent from the other laws suggesting a more thorough interest with protecting citizens from any potential bias; however this legislation has had its critics (Sasser, 2021). Mississippi's SB2113 and Idaho's HB377 exclusively specify categories of ideas and language consistent with CRT and Executive Order 13950, thus relegating all other divisive ideas to either previous legislation or as appropriate for teachers to compel students to adopt, affirm, or espouse. Neither of these options is likely. Legislation like these three laws are legally redundant because case law already exists banning schools from compelling students to behave (West Virginia Board of Education v. Barnette) or to believe (Mccollum v Board of Education) against their will. Since legislation already exists banning schools from practicing indoctrination, and since this SB2113 borrows common language from Trump's executive order, it is reasonable to question whether this law exists to promote the welfare of students or to promote the welfare of a political party by attacking educational institutions (Batker & Turpin, 2023).

The last notable feature of this type of legislation is what is reasonably allowed. Similar to the first category of restrictive education legislation that prohibited educators from promoting certain divisive ideas, these laws prohibit educators from compelling students to adopt, affirm, espouse, adhere, etc. specific divisive ideas. This does not bar educators from introducing the

ideas, reading about the ideas, discussing the ideas, or any other activity involving the ideas. This legal technicality functions just like it does with the first category of laws, that even though the legislation clearly states what activities are banned, a climate of fear and uncertainty is currently pervading the teaching profession (Batker & Turpin 2023; Kim 2021).

Prohibited From Including Concepts

While many of the introduced restrictive education legislation, like Florida's HB7, are wrongly thought to prohibit the inclusion of certain divisive concepts, many laws actually achieve this purpose. Kentucky's SB1, Iowa's HF802, and Oklahoma's HB1775 are examples of recent laws that prohibit the inclusion of certain concepts in either instruction, materials, or both.

These laws are where the legal language gets especially difficult for people to fulfill. Iowa's HF802 makes two statements that are contradictory. First, it states "[e]ach school district may continue training that fosters a workplace and learning environment that is respectful of all employees and students" (Iowa HF802). This statement seems to protect the rights of educators. Later, the law specifically clarifies that "[t]his section shall not be construed to do any of the following:... Prevent a school district from promoting racial, cultural, ethnic, intellectual, or academic diversity or inclusiveness" (Iowa HF802). This alone sounds like the opposite of what Executive Order 13950 originally prohibited. However, another statement in Iowa HF802 appears to contradict this by stating that no employee of a school district may "teach, advocate, encourage, promote, or act upon specific stereotyping and scapegoating toward others on the basis of demographic group membership or identity" (Iowa HF802). The bill defines race or sex stereotyping and race or sex scapegoating elsewhere in the law with language consistent with CRT and other restrictive education legislation.

Oklahoma's HB1775 provides a similar problem. At first glance, Oklahoma's HB1775 seems clear since it states that "[n]o teacher, administrator or other employee of a school district, charter school or virtual charter school shall require or make part of a course" any of the eight divisive concepts then listed (Oklahoma HB1775). However, right before this statement, a line states that "[t]he provisions of this subsection shall not prohibit the teaching of concepts that align to the Oklahoma Academic Standards" (Oklahoma HB1775). An example of one of these Oklahoma Academic Standards is an English Language Arts standard requiring 10th graders to "analyze the extent to which historical, cultural, and/or global perspectives affect authors' stylistic choices in grade-level literary and informational texts" (Review of Adopted Curriculum). Put together, Oklahoma high school English teachers without legal training are expected to teach students to analyze the effect global perspectives have on authors while omitting global perspectives on the topic of race and sex (Brown v. Chicago Bd. of Educ, 2012). Either legislators are unaware of what the Oklahoma Academic Standards require, or they are willfully censoring teaching that encourages students to think about the impact race and sex related constructs have on people.

The issues with Kentucky's SB1 are best understood after unpacking Iowa's HF802 and Oklahoma's HB1775, because it also censors teaching and materials, but it attempts to achieve this through similarly flawed means. In the same way that Oklahoma's HB1775 placed contradictory expectations on educators, Kentucky's SB1 expects teachers to provide instruction that is "consistent" with a provided list of concepts but is also consistent with the expectation that teachers provide instruction and materials that include "[t]he discussion of controversial aspects of history" (Kentucky SB1). It's as if legislators are trying to protect some rights while censoring other rights, but these two categories are not clearly defined, which creates anxiety

among educators who must navigate these laws and inflames conflict between educators and their communities when understandings of these laws do not align (Brake, 2023).

Iowa's HF802 is a clear example of what is necessary for a law like this to contain while also revealing the innate flaw from a censorship law. This law attempts specificity by stating educators may not teach included concepts. Objectively, this is a kindness for educators. Teachers should not have to guess what is or is not allowed in the classroom. A teacher in Iowa ought to be able to read this law and understand what not to include in instruction or classroom materials. However, this same specificity is likely impossible to effectively write in law (Feingold & Weishart, 2023). It is unreasonable to expect an educator without legal training to navigate the nuances of "promoting racial … inclusiveness" while simultaneously avoiding teaching concepts related to racial inclusiveness like race or sex scapegoating (Brown v. Chicago Bd. of Educ, 2012; Hill, 2022; Iowa HF802). If a law is censoring what can and cannot be included in materials or instruction, then the law must specifically state what is prohibited. However, the nature of prohibiting instruction and materials regarding such a nebulous concept proves extremely difficult in practice (Feingold & Weishart, 2023). For example, this law censors the teaching of certain concepts, but does it enable the prosecution of a teacher who taught a book that inspired a student to consider on their own that "members of any race are inherently racist" (Iowa HF802)? When a law must be specific to communicate what is prohibited, then any lack of clarity subverts the effectiveness of the whole legislation and enables attacks on public education, which may or may not be the true purpose of these restrictive education legislation (Kim, 2021; Nelson & Hahn, 2010).

While the prohibition on the inclusion of concepts as an innate flaw of restrictive education legislation is the most notable feature of these laws, other features are also worth

noting such as the target who is being censored. Iowa's HF802 restricts school districts; Kentucky's SB1 similarly specifies public or charter schools, and Oklahoma HB1775 specifies people like teachers and administrators. As discussed previously, this distinction is significant. Since laws like these must be born from a perceived problem in society and voiced by constituents, then it is safe to assume that these restrictive education legislation are attempting to halt practices recognized by a source. In other words, legislators saw a problem in society and introduced these laws to stop people or institutions from continuing harm. Following this logic, Iowa and Kentucky seem to be ascribing blame to school institutions, or at least they believe the problem can be stopped at the institutional level. In contrast, Oklahoma legislators appear to identify teachers and administrators as the blame bearers. Ultimately, this is introducing a problem of trust between society and public education (Davies 2019). Iowa's and Kentucky's legislation suggest a breakdown of trust with education institutions, while Oklahoma's legislation implies a lack of trust for the people that make up the institutions. This distinction may be relevant if repairing the broken relationship between public education and communities is to be possible.

Enforcement

Enforcement and penalty methods or more generally the lack of enforcement and penalty methods is relevant. Of the analyzed restrictive education legislation, only Florida's HB7 and New Hampshire's HB2 include defined enforcement or penalties (Friedman & Tager). Florida's HB7 specifies monetary fines and/or the loss of state financial support may be assigned as well as the possibility of professional discipline (Florida HB7). New Hampshire's HB1 allows for the

private right of action or professional discipline (New Hampshire HB2). Other enforcement or penalties associated with restrictive education legislation not discussed in this review include: contract penalties, civil suit by state attorney general, and criminal penalties" (Friedman & Tager).

Education Politicization's Effect on Educators

The following discussion will outline trends that affect the attrition of teachers. Then publications will be reviewed to unpack the ways in which educators may be newly affected by a more recent politicization of the teaching profession in the US. This section will then conclude with a brief exploration and conjecture regarding the potential differences that location (urban, suburban, and rural) may play as researchers and practitioners struggle to understand the possible differing perspectives of educators concerning restrictive education legislation.

Using one state as an example of a larger trend, in 2022, Oklahoma issued 4,574 emergency teaching certificates - nearly 4,500 more than a decade ago and indicates a substantially increased need to replace teachers who are preemptively leaving the profession (*Oklahoma State School Boards Association*, 2023). This data indicates a severe problem for Oklahoma public schools that should not be ignored. The problem could be explained away by looking no further than teacher salaries, which are on average $5,000 lower for Oklahoma teachers than in Texas, but this does not account for why teachers are leaving the profession altogether in Oklahoma (*Oklahoma State School Boards Association*, 2023), nationally (Nguyen, 2022), or even globally (Dos Santos, 2021). The extent of this problem has been labeled by many as a national and international crisis (Cells et al., 2023, p. 345; Karsenti & Collin, 2013; Santoro, 2011, p. 2; Worth & Faulkner-Ellis, 2021, p. 18; Zhang & Zeller, 2016).

Several factors have been attributed as the cause for the teacher attrition issue. Some cite the pressures of the COVID-19 pandemic (Worth & Faulkner, 2021, p. 3). However, the pandemic fails to explain why teachers have been leaving the profession more than they once did for the last four decades. In fact, a series of studies in the 1980s predicted "a severe teacher shortage in the future" if something did not change to affect the 40% of surveyed teachers who were considering leaving the profession (Henderson et al., 1984, p. 1). Another common reason given for the teacher attrition problem is teacher burnout (Santoro, 2021, p. 43). This is supported by research that recognizes teacher stresses that existed before the COVID-19 pandemic (Diliberti et al., 2021, p. 174). However, closer examination of these kinds of studies reveals logical flaws. For example, in a study examining why math and science teachers quit teaching, dissatisfaction due to feelings of ineffectiveness is listed as one factor towards teacher attrition; yet, one of the quotes from a teacher used to substantiate this claim states, "I know how to be a good science teacher...but I am not in the situation that allows my abilities, my natural abilities to come into play" (as cited in Denton et al., 2021, p. 175). This statement does suggest a sense of feeling ineffective, but it misdiagnoses the problem as burnout and thus misprescribes the wrong remedy (Denton et. al., 2021, p. 164). Therefore, if current understandings of teacher burnout are not fully understood, then responses made to address teacher attrition may be misguided.

While teacher burnout can cause some teachers to leave the profession, it does not explain why experienced teachers who are able to manage the stresses of teaching for many years with plans to teach long term seem to quit, sometimes quite suddenly. Santoro has made a much needed distinction to help explain the issue, which will be further unpacked later in this discussion. For now, according to Santoro (2011), there is a difference between teacher burnout

"where individual teachers' personal resources cannot meet the challenge of the difficulties presented by the work" verses demoralization, which "happens when experienced teachers who are fueled by the moral dimension of teaching find that they can no longer access the moral rewards embedded in the work" (2-3). This distinction provides much needed language for teachers and administrators to more accurately describe the tensions faced by educators with the potential for helpful interventions. Regardless, numerous theories exist and many conducted surveys suggest a variety of reasons for the current teacher attrition crisis (Diliberti et al., 2021; Struyven & Vanthournout, 2014). However, much of this data predates the advent of restrictive education legislation following President Trump's Executive Order 13950.

New empirical data from the PEW Research Center is helping researchers and practitioners understand the impact of these laws on teachers in increasingly specific ways (Lin et al., 2024). This adds to data that has been gathered demonstrating mixed perceptions of these policies by the general public (Polikoff et. al., 2022) and by teachers (Woo et. al., 2023). Furthermore, numerous news outlets are easily found to promote various sides of these policies, but few peer reviewed studies are available. For example, Polikoff et. al. (2022) utilized data from the Understanding America Survey, which has been around for years and surveys thousands of people, but this survey only captures perceptions that American adults have about teachers and classrooms. The PEW Research Center also surveyed US Adults who are parents of at least one child under the age of 18 about these divisive policies to ultimately determine there was "no consensus among parents about what they want their children to learn about gender identity or slavery"; however, results tend to align with political party stances (Horowitz, 2022). The perceptions of teachers were not measured in either of these two surveys.

Another example that is more focused on the experiences of educators is the American Instructional Resources Survey (AIRS), which is analyzed by Woo et. al., (2023) with the Rand Corporation. This report is a goldmine of quantitative data supporting conclusions that teachers are impacted by restrictive education legislation; yet, their findings are not conclusive and do not capture several specific factors. The report argues that teachers are impacted, but it does not say why teachers give inconsistent responses within states where teachers ought to have similar experiences. The report does not explain to what extent, if any, these policies and legislation are impacting instruction or just the teachers. And, most importantly for this current study, the report does not describe with qualitative data specific to the population contexts in which teachers are employed, lived experiences. In other words, the report does not explain how urban, suburban, or rural teachers are experiencing restrictive education legislation. New research exclusively capturing the experiences of each location category of educators is needed because their individual differing perceptions tend to be lost when gathered in larger samples including respondents from all three. More on this below.

Politicization of Public Education

The politicization of public education in the US has been a growing national trend for the last 60 years (Neundorf et al., 2023; Rose, 2004). This has been measured using a variety of formal and informal methods. One of the most compelling recent studies was an international project where 760 experts across 160 different countries were surveyed on their country's educational history related to their history of democratization from 1945 to 2021 (Paglayan et al., 2023). The survey consisted of 14 questions focusing on the teaching of political values as well as the hiring and firing of teachers. The results suggest that the United States has an extremely low amount of federal level control over these two categories as opposed to other countries like

Iran or Yemen with moderate to hard autocracies (Mohammadreza'i et al., 2023; Neundorf et al., 2023). These two statements, that the politicization of the United States is simultaneously increasing and generally difficult to achieve, seem like contradictory claims, but meaning can still be made.

When examining American educational policy from the national level, relatively few laws exist. Furthermore, even though it is difficult to judge the degree to which these laws furthered political agendas at the time of their passing, none of them can be clearly traced back to such clearly political motivations as current restrictive education legislation can be connected back to Executive Order 13950 and the infamous Fox News segment (Alexander et al., 2023). A few of the most significant federal education laws in recent history include the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) in the 60s, which led to the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001 and later the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015 and laid the foundation for the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA) of 2004. In the 70s, the Family Education Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) was passed, and while a few other federal education laws exist such as short term executive orders or COVID-19 relief bills, these few capture the majority of the legislative impact the US government has had on public education (Jameson, 2020; Skinner, 2022; Villegas, 2023). The lack of federal education legislation is largely because the US constitution and amendments do not specifically mention public education; the 10th amendment delegates the responsibility of public education to the state level. The lack of language regarding education in the constitution can be viewed as good or bad, which was a problematic reality for researchers conducting the large international study. While a strong democracy will encourage students to critically examine different viewpoints, that same democracy is likely unable to leverage political power to reinforce those democratic ideals

(Paglayan et al., 2023). This creates a philosophical quandary. The form of government in the strongest position to mandate and maintain political ideals like democratic ideals is an autocracy, which is inherently anti-democratic. Solving this political issue goes beyond the scope of this review, but the presence of this issue explains why the US, a country with comparably strong democratic safeguards internationally, is unable to protect itself from an ever growing political divide regarding and politicization of education policy at the state level. Perhaps Plato's warnings of dictators, tyrants, and demagogues born out of democracies is accurate (1943).

While 45 US states have introduced restrictive education legislation, only 21 have voted one of these bills into law (Feingold & Weishart, 2023; Friedman & Tager). Earlier sections of this review have already detailed several examples of the ways state legislators are borrowing language from Trump's executive order to write bills that politicize education. This narrative is reinforced by reports from the media telling stories of book bans, curriculum restrictions, and teachers losing their jobs due to restrictive education legislation passed during the last 3 years (Alleyne, 2022; Barron, 2022). These reports along with the scholarly literature illustrate why the US's capacity for politicizing education at the federal level is extremely low compared to other countries, while the politicization of education at the state level can be the highest it has been in the last 60 years. While the current politicization of education through legislation may be a fairly supported claim, little can be so clearly argued regarding the ways in which educators are impacted by education politicization.

While it is not easy for legislators to rally support in order to pass legislation, it may be far easier to ratify a bill than it is for implementers to secure requisite funding or to navigate successful implementation. For example, President Bush's NCLB legislation is notorious for its noble intent yet harmful unforeseen ramifications (Amrein-Beardsley, 2009). It is difficult for

policymakers to foresee the practical effects that legislation will have on the people who are affected by its requirements; educators as implementers are a prime example of this (Manna et al., 2012). Therefore, since teachers fulfill such a critical function towards facilitating the teaching and learning of students in public school classrooms while limited by legal constraints, their viewpoints matter (Kersaint et al., 2007; Milner, 2013; Spillane et al., 2011; Wronowski and Urick, 2021). Although there is a gap in the literature that captures the experiences of teachers who have been teaching since the relatively new flurry of restrictive education legislation, previous research suggests that when the teaching profession becomes highly politicized, teachers are affected by this politicization (Blase, 1988; Pizmony-Levy & Woolsey, 2017).

Restrictive education legislation censors academic freedom, which is essential to education in a democracy (Bryden & Mittenzwei, 2013; Nelson & Hahn, 2010). Teachers may feel the injustice of their own censorship (Bryant, 1998; Wildavsky & O'Connor, 2013), or teachers may have a problem with the infringement of rights to learning on behalf of students (Macfarlane, 2012; Macfarlane, 2016). Considering the current staffing challenges schools are facing, the added stress these policies and legislation may enhance is cause for concern. However, it is likely a mistake to lump all teachers together regarding the politicization of the profession. Various contextual factors may affect the ways in which teachers experience restrictive education legislation. Foremost among these factors is teaching locale.

The Unique Rural Experience

In order to make sense of data, geographical locale designations, urban, suburban, and rural, are common units of analysis to organize research participants. However, it can be difficult to derive useful implications from data sets that include participants from all three of the major

locale designations. As a result, rural voices can easily become lost within larger datasets. The following section gives a quick summary of several factors that are germane and typical of the rural locale. The rural locale designation is often used oversimplistically to categorize residents who live outside of urban and suburban contexts. Rural consists of people living in extremely remote areas as well as areas that can also be considered suburban (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023). For this reason, researchers often struggle to lump people from these areas together when seeking to make sense of data (Beyer, 2022). For this reason, significant diversity among rural resident opinions is expected, but is largely neglected when discussing major trends. For example, teacher turnover is lower in rural areas than in urban areas, but often consistent with suburban areas (Lankford et al., 2002). Rural teachers tend to be less prepared than suburban teachers, but not to the degree of most urban educators. (Wiggan et al., 2021). New teacher recruitment is also a problem. One study suggested preservice teachers positively consider teaching in a rural setting, but later change their minds by the end of their rural student teaching experience (Oyen & Schweinle, 2020). Various reasons exist to explain why people may be discouraged from teaching in a rural environment including low pay, lack of professional resources and development for teachers, and higher load of extracurricular responsibilities (Anderson & Summerfield, 2010). Potentially as a result of these factors, rural student learning achievement tends to lag behind suburban but exceed urban student performances (Wiggan et al., 2021).

Beyond these fairly ubiquitous locale distinctions are race and gender tendencies that impact the potential interactions rural educators may experience with restrictive education legislation. Teachers of color are less likely to teach in a rural context (Berry et al., 2010; Oyen & Schweinle, 2020). This means rural teachers are predominantly white, which aligns with the

majority of rural residents. Rural communities also tend to retain more traditional and patriarchal gender roles for teachers that manifest as expectations for primary school teaching jobs as an extension of motherhood (Montgomery, 2000; Morojele, 2012). Furthermore, rural residents tend to vote for conservative policies (Pew Research Center, 2023). This data by itself would likely predict either a lack of knowledge of or a disregard for restrictive education legislation. However, the fact that teachers are formally educated and work within a profession that is most often supported by liberal policies complicates predictions about rural teacher responses to this phenomena of policies. The duality of these two predictions is the foundation for the formulation of this study's two research questions.

This current study is not the first to apply Santoro's demoralization theory to understand the experiences of teachers impacted by policy and legislation. Wronowski and Urick (2021) conducted a quantitative study examining the ways in which teachers experience deprofessionalization and demoralization as a result of accountability policies inspired by the No Child Left Behind Act. Through this study, researchers found that teacher deprofessionalization and demoralization increased from the state- to federal-level accountability periods and that there are significant predictors of deprofessionalization and demoralization at the teacher level and school level (Wronowski and Urick, 2021, p. 708-709). The findings of this study inspire the need for this current study. If teachers experienced demoralization as a result of government policies related to the No Child Left Behind Act, then we can postulate that teachers are experiencing demoralization related to restrictive education legislation.

Chapter 3: Methods

Experiences of restrictive education legislation by rural educators may be important to understand because scholars have made connections between educators and other legislation and

policy (Greenfield et al., 2010; Wronowski & Urick, 2021). However, few studies capture the lived experiences of rural teachers as an autonomous group separate from urban and suburban educators in relation to the new phenomena of restrictive education legislation (Feingold & Weishart, 2023; Pollock, 2023). In fact, few have yet to explore the effects of restrictive education legislation on educators at all (Lin et al., 2024; Woo et al., 2023). Furthermore, while research exists utilizing Santoro's theory of Demoralization (Croft et al. 2015; Grissom et al., 2014), none could be found applying Santoro's construct to current restrictive education legislation. The lived experiences of rural teachers regarding this legislative phenomena is important to explore since staffing rural classrooms can be difficult (Oyen & Schweinle, 2020; Showalter et al., 2019).

Building on the existing literature, this study observed rural educator's perspectives on restrictive education legislation by using qualitative methods. To investigate the possible relationship between rural educators and restrictive education legislation, a qualitative research design was used to uncover the perspectives of rural teachers about these laws. This study drew from qualitative interviews (n=24) conducted with rural educators to record the ways in which they understand restrictive education legislation and their effects or lack of effects on education to their rural contexts. This study's research question is the following:

Research Question 1. *For rural educators who believe they are impacted by restrictive education legislation, how do they describe their experiences?*
Research Question 2. *For rural educators who do not believe they are impacted by restrictive education legislation, what reasons are described for the lack of impact?*

While objective meanings may exist for phenomena, absolute assurance of objective truth is often debatable regardless of the given phenomena (Crotty, 1998, p. 8). This stance, therefore, values the individual as an active participant who works to determine the truth about phenomena, which as a result acknowledges the subjective nature of what is and is not true (Creswell, 2017,

p. 24). This understanding of knowledge lies at the core of the constructionist epistemological stance (Crotty, 1998, p. 8-9). Constructionism exists as a response to the assurances Objectivism hoped to capture through conducting research that adhered to the scientific method (Crotty, 1998, p. 8). While Objectivism may be comfortable, Constructionism recognizes the futility of searching for absolute truths (Crotty, 1998, p. 9). Through research founded upon constructionist principles, meaning can be constructed as a method of understanding phenomena as it is experienced by individuals even though experiences may appear conflicting.

Using a constructionist epistemological approach for this study, the content of the interviews were used to discern patterns among people who have experienced shared phenomena, rather than use research to seek objective truth. Therefore, a phenomenological form of social science research makes the most sense for a line of inquiry attempting to recognize patterns of lived experiences by teachers, which in this study pertains to how rural educators have experienced restrictive education legislation. Prior understandings of restrictive education legislation on teachers are insufficient, because the world in which teachers teach has new barriers; this warrants the pursuit of new perspectives in academic scholarship to construct a fuller understanding of what rural teachers are experiencing today. The use of Santoro's work with demoralization helps to make sense of the interview data gathered regarding experiences with restrictive education legislation.

Descriptive Data

Setting

The setting for this study is rural Oklahoma. The selection of Oklahoma is secondary to the fact that a high number of rural schools exist in this area, thus making it an excellent proving

ground for this study. Additionally, by limiting the study setting to Oklahoma, the research implications drawn from the interview data benefit from the control, because it can be assumed that all participants are explaining their experiences with teaching amid the same legislative requirements. Furthermore the political context is a relevant feature. Voting trends for decades have been largely conservative by the majority of Oklahoma residents and are unignorable as the experiences of teachers in this state must be understood through this geopolitical lens.

Oklahoma is a fascinating state to study, because over half of its public schools are rural (Showalter, et al., 2019). Most rural students make up less than 25% of all students in their state, meaning Oklahoma is in a strong position to represent a rural educational context (Showalter, et al., 2019). Oklahoma's reality of rurality combined with the above teacher shortage information means that Oklahoma is struggling to staff classrooms in rural contexts.

Furthermore, the Oklahoma state government has been a national leader for policy and legislation attempting to restrict the decision-making power of public schools. As mentioned previously, HB 1775 prohibits public school teachers from teaching that "one race or sex is inherently superior to another," and that "an individual, by virtue of his or her race or sex, is inherently racist, sexist or oppressive" (Oklahoma HB1775). Those who support the bill believe this counters the promotion of Critical Race Theory in schools. Besides HB1775, several other restrictive education bills have been voted into Oklahoma state law, but none of them have restrict gender or race content in classrooms.

Using the U.S. Census Bureau's classifications for rural locales, The NCES defines rural fringe, distant, and remote as:

Rural-fringe: Census-defined rural territory that is less than or equal to 5 miles from an Urbanized Area, as well as rural territory that is less than or equal to 2.5 miles from an Urban Cluster.

Rural-distant: a census-defined rural territory that is more than 5 miles or less than or equal to 25 miles from an urbanized area

Rural-remote: a census-defined rural territory that is more than 25 miles from an urban area and more than 10 miles from an urban cluster (NCES, 2006)

Oklahoma has 394 school districts identified as rural-fringe, rural-remote and rural-distant as depicted in Table 2 as well as the number of interviews conducted for each U.S. Census Bureau classification.

Table 2

Number of Rural Districts in Oklahoma

Census-defined Rural Territories	Oklahoma Districts	Number of Interviews
Fringe	58	3
Distant	198	12
Remote	138	9
Total	394	24

Note: * The Census-defined rural territory classifications for rural schools in Oklahoma are from the NCES. The rural fringe classification includes suburban schools. As a result, I excluded the rural-fringe category.

After Oklahoma school districts were categorized according to NCES classifications, schools within those districts were organized using the same classifications. This is also necessary to attempt a balanced representation of experiences is captured across grade levels.

Sample Selection

As of the 2020-2021 school year, Oklahoma had just under 43,000 public school teachers (*Oklahoma Public Schools - FAST FACTS - 2020-21*, 2021). More than half of Oklahoma's public schools are in rural settings (Who are Oklahoma's Rural Learners? Why it Matters Summer 2020 | BRIEF 4, 2020). With such a large proportion of students and educators residing in rural Oklahoma, their voices ought to be better represented in the literature. Thus all 24 samples came from this rural population.

Table 3 displays the number of participants subsetted by their locale in Oklahoma as organized by their rural subcategorization as well as the number of interviews gathered within each grade level category. The total number of participants represents 1.0% of teachers in Oklahoma rural-fringe schools, 2.9% of teachers in Oklahoma rural-distant schools, and 2.9% of teachers in Oklahoma rural-remote schools.

This descriptive study of rural public school educators identified participants using a stratified random sample of rural teachers created by using data from the U.S. Census Bureau, NCES, and the Oklahoma State Department of Education. The U.S. Census Bureau's categorizations for rural areas in the United States, Fringe, Distant, and Remote, were used to select rural educator participants from a diverse array of rural contexts (Koziol et al., 2015).

Table 3

Number of Rural Schools in Oklahoma and Number of Semi-Structured Interviews

School Type	Number of Schools	% of Locale	Number of Interviews	Interview % of Locale
Rural-Fringe				
Elementary	188	61.04	1	33.33
Middle or Junior High	84	27.27	1	33.33
High	36	11.69	1	33.33

Total rural-fringe	308	100	3	100
Rural-Distant				
Elementary	171	41.30	3	25.00
Middle or Junior High	69	16.67	2	16.67
High	174	42.03	7	58.33
Total rural-distant	414	100	12	100
Rural-Remote				
Elementary	126	40.65	5	55.56
Middle or Junior High	37	11.94	1	11.11
High	147	47.42	3	33.33
Total rural-remote	310	100	9	100
Total Schools	1032	100	24	100

Participant Recruitment

Using publicly available data listed on the Oklahoma State Department of Education's website, emails were sent to every rural teacher's school email listed on the website. To introduce the study, a recruitment script was sent asking for teachers to respond requesting more information if they were potentially interested in the study. A second email was sent to these teachers prompting them to respond again if they were interested in setting up a time to conduct an interview over Zoom. This process resulted in 24 participants. From these 24 participants, several attempts at reaching more participants through snowball methods were attempted, but none of these attempts were successful. No further rounds of recruitment occurred.

Twenty four (n = 24) semi-structured interviews were conducted to develop the

transcript data. These 24 participants are represented in Table 4 by their school type, the locale of the school, and the number of students enrolled.

Table 4

Participants

Participant	Gender	Years of Teaching Experience	School Type	Locale	Student Enrollment
Participant 1	Female	27	Elementary	Remote	206
Participant 2	Female	15	Elementary	Remote	335
Participant 3	Female	19	Elementary	Fringe	467
Participant 4	Female	8	High	Remote	442
Participant 5	Female	28	High	Distant	167
Participant 6	Female	3	Elementary	Distant	587
Participant 7	Female	9	High	Distant	282
Participant 8	Female	12	High	Distant	239
Participant 9	Female	5	Elementary	Distant	330
Participant 10	Female	6	Elementary	Remote	198
Participant 11	Female	11	Elementary	Remote	557
Participant 12	Female	6	High	Distant	509
Participant 13	Female	15	High	Remote	82
Participant 14	Female	31	High	Distant	331
Participant 15	Female	26	Middle	Distant	162
Participant 16	Female	28	High	Distant	175
Participant 17	Male	6.5	Middle	Distant	484
Participant 18	Male	16	Middle	Fringe	78
Participant 19	Female	9	High	Remote	167
Participant 20	Female	3	Elementary	Distant	587
Participant 21	Female	30	Elementary	Remote	149
Participant 22	Female	21	Middle	Remote	162
Participant 23	Female	22	High	Distant	70
Participant 24	Male	21	High	Fringe	2036

In order to capture the experiences of rural teachers who are currently teaching under restrictive education legislation, 24 teachers were interviewed. These 24 teachers were selected based on their specific locale classification as defined by the National Center for Education statistics who recognize three categories of rural schools: rural fringe, rural remote, and rural

distant. Originally, this study was hoping for 30 participants with 10 participants from each category of rural. Since fewer than 30 teachers agreed to participate in the study, all willing participants were allowed to participate. As previously mentioned, the snowball sampling method was unsuccessfully attempted (Creswell, 2017, p. 159).

To recruit participants for this study, contact between the researcher and rural teachers was needed. A spreadsheet was found on the state department of education website with 152, 360 rows of Oklahoma teacher names with identifying information including name, email address, school at which they teach, and more. This list was reduced through the use of filters to identify 3,510 unique teacher emails for rural Oklahoma teachers. The researcher then sent recruitment emails to all of these email addresses. Of the more than 3,500 emails sent, 86 teachers asked for more information by responding to the initial recruitment email. Of those 86 teachers, 24 teachers responded to the first email and all following correspondence to set up and complete an interview for this study. These 24 participants are found in Table 6. Since the original goal was to gather experiences from 30 participants, there was no need to determine criteria by which to further restrict recruitment methods beyond the requirement that the participants are rural teachers in Oklahoma. All interview scheduling was completed through email and all interviews were completed using Zoom and lasted about an hour.

Interview Procedures

In a pilot study, three teachers (n=3) were interviewed with semi-structured interviews to try to answer the research question: What considerations do Mormon High School teachers, who have taught for five to fifteen years, give to their own moral identity? This study yielded several useful lessons that informed this current study. First, qualitative sample sizes for teachers must be larger than three participants and from more than a single location if any degree of

generalizability is to be accomplished. Second, since the three teachers interviewed did not give considerations to their moral identity, then the interview process was awkward and difficult from which to derive knowledge. Regardless, the experience of developing research methods, developing questions, and soliciting participants necessary to enable this current study was invaluable. As a result, the same interview process is utilized for this study, the use of a phenomenological study is used, and the morality component is still present even though the research and survey questions are completely different.

To maintain confidentiality, anonymizing was used for participants and their individual communities, districts, and schools. In addition, all identifiable school and community information was redacted during the transcription process. This required the deletion of town names, school mascots, community businesses, and descriptions of historical events exclusive to towns or school districts. A randomized number was assigned for each school and participant to keep the collected data clear despite the redacted names. For example, “Participant 1,” “School 1,” or “Town 1” are all within the same rural community and therefore represent a participant from the corresponding school and town.

Appendix B displays the semi-structured interview questions used during each interview session. The questions used were a combination of descriptive and theoretical. The descriptive questions are intended to describe the perceptions of teachers regarding their unique teaching contexts as well as how they perceive restrictive education legislation. The theoretical questions are attempting to capture beliefs and feelings that may be separate from what teachers are actually experiencing.

As the participants began scheduling interviews and as the interviews began, participants were catalogued in a spreadsheet using Google Sheets with the following information: Completed

Interview, Oral Consent Received, Name, Pseudonym, District, Locale, Interview Date, School, Gender, Years of Experience, Student Enrollment, and 8 columns of demographic data. As the interviews began, analysis occurred concurrently, which helped inform subsequent interviews.

Each interview was recorded using Zoom. Interviews were audio and video recorded using Zoom. Zoom produced interview transcripts that were uploaded to NVivo for analysis. Line by line edits were completed to check for accuracy.

All the interviews began the same way. Once the participant joined the Zoom meeting, casual greetings were shared. The researcher asked how their day was going and expressed gratitude for participating in the study even though gratitude is formally stated in the introduction of the interview protocol. The researcher made intentional efforts to be warm and friendly through smiling and good humor so as to begin building trust between researcher and participant. Then the participant was asked if the interview could be recorded, which was allowed by all participants.

Data Analysis

Before interview analysis began, a list of 140 *a priori* codes were developed from the literature and can be found in Appendix B. These codes were used as a starting point for transcript analysis; however, room for *a posteriori* was allowed as themes emerged from the data. The interview transcripts underwent multiple rounds of coding. The first read of each transcript was accompanied by listening to the audio recording of the interview. The purpose of this first round of analysis was to capture transcription errors and to notate on paper pauses and other nonverbal elements by the interview participant. The second round of reading each transcript was also accompanied by the audio recording, but the purpose of this round of reading was to assign codes to specific lines of the interview. This second round relied on the *a priori*

codes found in Appendix B as well as an openness to emergent *a posteriori* codes. This second round of reading the transcripts resulted in 283 total codes from both methods of coding. Codes were developed by labeling as explicitly as possible the experiences described in interviews. This round of coding was accompanied by using NVivo's autocodding feature as an attempt to check the codes that were developing by the researcher. These autocodes were largely unhelpful, because they counted the frequency of words in transcripts without analyzing content. For example, the code "little bit" was autocoded 13 times across five transcripts; all of these are meaningless. A third and final reading of the transcripts occurred with the goal of condensing overlapping and repetitive codes as well as more accurately naming of codes. This round resulted with a clearer organization of 153 codes that logically fell into three themes with 9 sub themes, which is found in Appendix D. There was also a category of codes that were ultimately judged irrelevant to the research question. While there were three distinct waves of interview coding by reading entire transcripts, there were innumerable rereads of passages that were difficult to clearly code. This process followed the same procedures beginning by searching for deductive codes then re-reading to label emergent themes. These early analyses avoided seeking major themes; instead, specific language that resonated with the literature were prioritized. To this end, specific words and phrases were highlighted and organized using NVivo software. Ultimately, this became a recursive process of reading interviews, returning to the *a priori* codes, and organizing trends and patterns.

In an effort to increase integrity measures for the study, an outside researcher was given three interview transcripts with redacted identifiable information. For the most part, coding was either similar to the original coding, or helped to refine codes to more accurate language. One example of this refinement is with Sub Theme 6: Context found within Theme 1:Minimal or

Lack of Experience with Restrictive Education Legislation. Originally, this sub theme only had the codes “rurality” and “demographics”. After revision from the outside researcher, it made sense to include the code “subject matter or grade level” to this sub theme rather than have it be it’s own sub theme since the subject matter or grade level that a teacher teaches seems to affect a teacher’s experience in similar ways to that of their geographical location or demographic makeup. Originally Theme 3: Positive Experience with Restrictive Education Legislation did not exist because so few participants spoke to this experience, but nonetheless, it was represented in the data and needed to be included.

Interview Protocols

Each interview began with a prewritten introduction to express gratitude, to inform participants that they could decline to answer any question, and to state the purpose of the study. It also gave an opportunity for participants to ask questions before the interview began, but no participants had questions at that time. Then, the interview started with questions seeking to gather basic orientation data from the participants as well as to develop a foundational bond between the interviewer and the participant. These questions encouraged participants to describe their history within the field of education such as number of years teaching, where they have taught, and why they chose to teach. After asking several introductory questions to learn more about the participant’s background in education, each interview moved into a section focused on policy. This policy section began with the same question, “Are there any race or gender related school policies that affect your work as an educator?” From here, each interview attempted to follow the interview protocol but not at the cost of ignoring the natural flow of the conversation. For example, some participants brought up specific legislation during the section of the interview where the researcher is asking for experiences regarding general race or gender related school

policies. When this happened, the researcher then skipped ahead to ask the prewritten questions that pertained to the legislation brought up by the participant.

Chapter 4: Findings

The intent of this study is to capture the experiences of rural educators whose teaching is subject to recent restrictions on what can be included regarding race and gender. Theoretical work from Santoro suggests teachers may experience demoralization as a result of restrictive education legislation if they are not able to participate in what they believe to be good teaching. The researcher interviewed 24 rural educators to capture their experiences regarding restrictive education legislation. Then, Santoro's demoralization framework is used to interpret and analyze the findings.

This chapter details the interviews, the themes, and the evidence collected from the participants in order to answer Research Question 1, for rural educators who believe they are impacted by restrictive education legislation, how do they describe their experiences? and Research Question 2, for rural educators who do not believe they are impacted by restrictive education legislation, what reasons are described for the lack of impact?. A full overview of the three themes and their sub themes that emerged are presented in Table 6 located at the end of this chapter.

Theme 1: Minimal or Lack of Experience with Restrictive Education Legislation

The most common theme that emerged from interviews of rural teachers was a minimal or lack of experience with restrictive education legislation. Most teachers described a lack of experience with restrictive education legislation for different reasons, which is why it is best understood by its separation into six sub themes: Sub Theme 1: Administrative Support Variability, Sub Theme 2: Community Values Override Legislation, Sub Theme 3: Practical

Education Concerns Outweigh Policy, Sub Theme 4: Professional Identity Preservation, Sub Theme 5: Political Views, and Sub Theme 6: Context. Essentially, the majority of participants expressed either minimal experience or no experience with restrictive education legislation, which ought to be of interest to legislators since all participants teach in a state with at least one piece of legislation that restricts what can be taught in the classroom, specifically HB1775. These six subcategories relate to each other in this first theme as they all help explain why each teacher ignores this legislation.

Sub Theme 1: Administrative Support Variability

Of the 24 interviews, all 24 participants answered the opening question, "Are there any race or gender related school policies that affect your work as an educator?", with some version of "No". However, further prompting usually caused the participant to think of more than the initial answer of "No" would suggest, either to further explain their negative answer or to later contradict this first answer. Participant 16 captured well what several expressed:

> *No. The topic has come up in the past couple of years, but it's always just kind of something that is, I hate to use the old, 'Don't ask; don't tell' type of things, but it's just something that we, just, there's no policy. We just work with kids.*

Not only does this statement capture a common sentiment among rural educators concerning the prevailing lack of experience with restrictive education legislation, but it also introduces a common experience involving the role of school and district leadership in regards to how teachers experience restrictive education legislation. Participant 5 has several administrative responsibilities alongside her teaching assignments and describe the unimportance of providing guidance about implementing HB1775 this way:

> *So I'm saying that that's not something that we would go,'Oh, all of our teachers need to know it,' and we would send it out.*

Later on in the interview, this participant expressed support for the law and what it was trying to accomplish, so it is significant that she did not believe teachers needed administrative guidance for correct implementation of the law's provisions. This educator's experience was coded as Lack of Guidance or School Policy, which is the code that every teacher interviewed described in one way or another and is the strongest code to support the theme.

Further interview data expands on why there seems to be a lack of guidance or school policy in rural schools despite the existence of HB1775's prohibitions. Six participants expressed feelings of trust from their administrators to navigate the expectations of this law without specific guidance. Participant 14 explained:

> *I think at the beginning of the year, they go through the new stuff, and that's about it... Most of the time, you know, there's some mutual trust that has to go into play that you as a teacher know what line not to cross.*

This sentiment captures the experience that teachers have heard of and are aware of legislative changes like HB1775, but they have minimal experiences consciously adapting their practice to fit within the new restrictions of laws when their administrators do not emphasize the legislation's importance. Here, research suggests administrators may not emphasize certain legislation like HB1775 because they trust the discretion of their teachers. Participant 2 describes her experience getting hired at her current school:

> *Administration encourages and thanks us for being who we are and how we are in our morals and values. Whenever I applied for my school there was, like, a reference on my character, three or four references on character, three or four references on my education background, three or four references on multiple areas. I was like, I've never filled out a resume that intense.*

This experience, while alluding to the next sub theme about the importance of community values, underlines a philosophy held by rural administrators. This philosophy is that if the right teachers are hired, then they know best what needs to occur in the classroom, which prompts

administrators to take a hands-off approach about restricting what is learned or discussed in classrooms. This stance may seem bold, but its prevalence is supported by two other subcodes.

In the interview with Participant 5, who explained above that information about HB1775 did not need to go out to all teachers, she went on to explain that the teaching at her school likely already aligned with the restrictions of the law:

> *What our understanding of what was put in the bill…is that probably 95% of our teaching had already aligned with that bill.*

With all that administrators must cover in the days before school begins, it is reasonable to see why an administration might forgo covering new legislation about which they believed teachers were already in compliance.

Likewise, administrators may choose to prioritize other legislation or initiatives if they believe enforcement from the state Department of Education is unlikely. Six participants expressed beliefs similar to Participant 8 who said:

> *Being rural has its, has its advantages. We're far enough away from the state legislature and the governor and all their enforcers that no one really pays attention to us. So, they can pass it, but unless they decide to come and check on us, they're not going to know. And I don't think, I hate to say this about our community, but most of them aren't going to report us, or they don't know how to report us. So…unless there's a reason for people to come in looking at you, I mean, they're not going to.*

This description suggests a trickle down element when legislation enforcement is missing or thought to be missing. If the state department is not enforcing HB 1775, but it is enforcing other legislation like HB 3958, then administrators may continue to prioritize which laws receive more focused enforcement. In the interview, when Participant 22 was asked, “Have you received guidance, instruction, support, or training regarding other policies from principals, administrators, or superintendents in the past?”, he described this experience:

> *Yeah, yes we have. The one I can remember most recently is about not texting kids individually. They made a big deal about that. I'm not that guy, but I understand why they want to cover their butt, and actually, it kind of covers me too, but I never was bad about texting kids anyway.*

In this quote, Participant 22 references Oklahoma's HB 3958, which is primarily seen as a restriction on educator's means of communicating with students. This participant is among those who did not receive guidance regarding HB 1775, but did receive guidance regarding a separate law that places similar restrictions on teachers. When asked why a difference of enforcement may exist between these two laws, Participant 23 explained:

> *I think, like, with the no contact with the students and things is because of all the sexual harassment, that pedophile type inappropriate behaviors from a sexual standpoint, versus, versus this other. I think that, like, the no contact with kids and stuff comes from more of a, like, an illegal, like arrested from the police, 'you're going to do jail time' kind of thing. With this other, the state might just intervene, and you may have due process and things like that, and you could lose your license, but as far as the other is like, arrest, you know? The, I mean, just like coming from that aspect and about that, their children and their safety and their you know? I don't know. To me, it's more, like, concrete with the 'no contact' versus the 'critical race'. It's that, it's so (pause) subjective and (pause) subjective, you know? I think the other one is very, you know, like, cut and dry; you don't do this, and this one leaves so many openings for interpretation, and that really, there's not anybody, especially state department, that's going to really want to break all that down.*

The repeated hesitations throughout this account helps capture this teacher's struggle to articulate the differing degree of attention district leadership gave to two separate examples of restrictive education legislation. Participant 23 effectively says that one law is seen as more important than the other because the severity of enforcement is different. Essentially, this teacher does not believe the state Department of Education will enforce HB 1775, which, evidently, is shared by her administration and others'.

If these accounts were all that the interviews yielded, then this first sub theme would have been Lack of Guidance or School Policy; however, four participants expressed experiences of receiving specific guidance from district leadership regarding how to implement race or gender

policies like HB 1775. When asked about these kinds of policies, one band director at first could not think of any discourse on this topic at his current school, but soon remembered conversations and guidance about students who have preferred names that differ from their birth name. This then sparked a memory of a recent time in which students needed to sign up for hotel rooms for a band trip. One student who is identified in the school information system as female, but identified as male, signed up for a room with three other male students. Participant 24 explained:

> *And so I was like, 'Okay', wasn't sure how to handle this. Tread lightly. You know, I don't want to offend anyone. Also, I don't want to get myself or the school or anyone else in trouble. So I just reached out to the principal and I was like, 'Hey, I don't know if you've encountered this yet, but is there even a district policy on this yet?' And there was not, and he said that actually they had dealt with it, with; I don't know if it was Stuco or debate team. Anyway, there was another group like, just a week or two earlier that had encountered the exact same thing with a different student and they had discussed it amongst the district administrators to just kind of decide what they wanted to do, and their decision was reach out to the parents and if the parents of the student who identified differently than their biological gender was okay with it, notify them that we would have to notify the roommates, and if they were okay with it, then the school district was okay with it.*

This account provides an example of clear administrative guidance given to a teacher who was concerned that an issue may get himself or the school into trouble. It is also consistent with the previous code that there was an absence or official policy on this issue, but specific guidance was given nonetheless, even though the guidance was rendered after a problem arose. Conversely, three other participants explained that they were directed to follow district approved curriculum or state standards. Participant 1 explained the guidance she receives from the superintendent at the beginning of school years:

> *When it comes to things like that, he tells us, 'Teach your standards. Stick to the standards. Don't veer away from them," you know, 'If your students want to have a conversation, you can let them, but overall, you just stick to the standards and don't, you'll be safe if you stick to the standards'. And that's what, and that's what the majority of teachers do.*

The three participants who were directed to teach their approved district curriculum or state standards represent a minority of teachers who are receiving proactive guidance or support regarding restrictive education legislation before problems arise.

While some district leadership gives no guidance on how to navigate restrictive education legislation, and some district leadership gives specific guidance on these laws, eight educators expressed generic guidance from their district leaders that can broadly be interpreted as teacher trust in their leaders. For example, when Participant 19, who regularly attends board meetings, was asked how aware her school board was of the ways state legislation is impacting teachers, she said:

> *For the most part, our board is really supportive. I haven't seen anything that has been concerning for us. Right now, we have a really good set of people on our Board of Education.*

This sentiment captures a sense of trust between a teacher and her local school board that is shared with five other participants. This data suggests that while specific guidance has not been given in some school systems regarding how to adhere to the expectations of restrictive education legislation, a pattern of trust has been cultivated in these communities by school boards. This implies that teachers in these areas believe their school boards will provide further guidance in the future if it should become necessary.

Further support from district leadership was expressed by two educators, which at first glance seems specific, but in reality gives generic guidance. Participant 9 states:

> *Whatever the rule is that the state tells us, we just go by that. That's our official policy.*

The use of the nonspecific word, whatever, at the beginning of this statement is consistent with the rest of that particular interview. This teacher knew little of HB 1775 and expressed minimal

experiences related to the law. Her experiences reveal a lack of specific knowledge of what this law requires and trusts her district to provide guidance if it is needed, but as of the time of her interview for this study, restrictive education legislation fell into a category of laws for her that she knew little about yet believed the practices of her school and herself to be in compliance.

These eight participants represent a third of the experience data captured. This set of experiences suggests that many teachers in rural schools lack knowledge of what is required by legislation like HB 1775. Even though each of these participants had heard of the law, none of the eight expressed positive or negative experiences with it, because their leadership did not seem to provide much guidance about it.

Finally, two participants described how their administration is actively resistant to restrictive education legislation. Participant 20 explained:

> *Our superintendent has a, he's got a backbone and he's going to stand up for our kids and stand up for our district, and he's not really in it to play, to play games with anybody at the State Department [of Education]… We're not messing around with, we're not going to do, we're not going to kowtow to what it is they want us to do on all these things.*

This account captures how, even though it is a minority of experiences, some rural leadership has taken a strong stance against implementing restrictive education legislation. It should also be noted that this experience was expressed by an educator from a rural distant location, suggesting that resistance to these laws may be present outside of urban, suburban, and even rural fringe areas.

Taken together, all of these teachers expressed minimal or lack of experience with restrictive education legislation like HB 1775 because of the influence of their district leadership. The one unifying element to the codes within this sub theme seems to be the absence of experiences of clear guidance from leaders on how this law has important implications for what

teachers should change in the classroom. As such, these interviews suggest many rural teachers have not had experiences with restrictive education legislation because rural school leadership does not place much value in this legislation; however, the exact means of providing necessary support from administrations vary.

Sub Theme 2: Community Values Override Legislation

If the first sub theme could be quickly summarized, it might be that many rural teachers have minimal experiences with restrictive education legislation because of the priorities of their administrators. The second sub theme continues this trend with a slight change of guidance origin, because many participants described experiences where values of community members served as the primary guide for teachers to determine what should be taught in the classroom. The strongest indicator of this from the data are the 17 out of 24 participants who expressed that they felt like parents of their students trusted them. When asked about experiences with parents relating to restrictive education legislation, Participant 16 stated:

> *I think that being in a rural community insulates me from a lot of that. I mean, I have no concerns from any parents at all. I do have some, let me think. I feel like I have the trust of my families, and this is just my second year with [School], so I really feel like [pause] it was given to me when I walked in the door.*

Later, evidence will be provided to demonstrate how powerful relationships are between teachers and parents, but this quotation captures how this teacher experiences trust from parents in her community by virtue of her position as a teacher. This experience suggests rural parents may not be concerned with issues prohibited in restrictive education legislation since they are not voicing concerns to their children's teachers, even one like Participant 16 who is still relatively new to the community. Other teachers made this even more clear. Participant 14 plainly states about parents of her students:

> *Yeah, they put all my trust and faith, you know, all their trust and faith in me.*

Comments like this were common among the interview participants. Teachers often expressed an awareness of how teachers were negatively viewed in other areas either from the news or from social media, but their own interactions with their communities were largely positive. For example, Participant 17 stated:

> *I haven't had a lot of parents that are suspicious of what I'm teaching, but it is a small town, and I grew up here, so most of the parents know me in some, some sense, you know? Either from high school or their, their, their parents were friends with my parents or something, and so I kind of already have a reputation as someone who's not, you know, corrupted*.

This teacher contrasts with Participant 16 who was new to the community yet still benefited from the respectability of the teaching profession. Here, Participant 17 has earned a positive reputation, but the effect is still the same; many rural teachers are not expressing positive or negative experiences with restrictive education legislation, and they are attributing a lack of pressure from their community as a factor. Ultimately, the data from this section most strongly suggests that rural communities value their teachers.

Besides valuing the teachers, data from six interview participants suggests religious or family values tend to override values protected by restrictive education legislation. During one interview, Participant 18 was asked if his personal stance on the race and gender issues detailed in HB 1775 more or less aligned with that of the parents in the community; he responded:

> *I think it does. Again, that's, you know, because I believe that's, this community is more a [pause] Christian value type of community and those kinds of things, you know, have, you know, they, they set a tone in the school districts, and I believe in the rural school districts in particular. And at least in this one, I can see that, which is, I have no problem with that, because I believe those values are important.*

In this excerpt, the participant begins to describe how his views on race and gender align with that of his community, and immediately shifts to describe the religious values that he feels actually permeate his community. This reinforces the larger theme that many rural teachers are

not describing significant experiences with restrictive education legislation. Here, it is because religious values are more important.

While the data suggests the community prioritizes religious and family values over restrictive education legislation, an embedded component of understanding why this matters to teachers resides in the relationships several interview participants described. Towards the end of a lengthy interview, Participant 21 summarized much of what she was feeling by stating:

> *I think the difference is that I know my children; I know my families; I know all of them, and I think when you know, I know them personally, I know exactly what their values are, what they care about, you know?*

She then proceeded to recount a story of a time in which a student in class said he didn't believe in God. As a result, other students began arguing with him that the existence of God was a fact, but the teacher quickly stopped the debate saying that believing or not believing in God is a choice. In order to determine how to proceed, the teacher met with the parent of the student after school, explaining what occurred. The parent firmly responded that they believed in God and that the child should too. Not only does this story capture the presence of strong religious values in Participant 21's community, it also captures the relationship she has with the parents of her students. As a result, this teacher, and others, speak with confidence when they describe the community values that guide the parents of their students. Largely, the interview data suggests that parents value teachers to do their job, and they value their religious and family principles.

Furthermore, several participants described local needs that seemed to be a greater priority for community members than values protected by restrictive education legislation. During the interviews, participants were asked if the state legislature was addressing important needs through legislation like HB 1775. While this yielded different answers, fiscal concerns were mentioned by five participants. Participant 2 described the community's concerns about

taxation and bonds. Participant 19 described the lack of parent involvement during parent teacher conferences and mentioned that her students value money above all else, and Participant 1, while discussing issues her community has dealt with, stated as an aside:

> *How our money is spent is, people do watch that very, very closely, and I think because, well, my daughter, she works in the [Suburban School District], and they just don't, she just has no idea like what they spend their money on and how, and in our small town, you know exactly pretty much where every dollar is going.*

This description captures how one educator understands the weight of fiscal concerns to be uniquely considered in her rural community as contrasted to a larger metropolitan community.

Besides fiscal concerns, interview participants described other local needs such as curriculum preferences that did not have anything to do with the restrictions found in HB 1775. Participant 18, a science teacher, explained his experiences working with parents who did not want their children participating in the district selected sex education curriculum. Participant 24 described witnessing a choir teacher navigate a parent's complaint regarding satanic imagery in a Halloween song, and Participant 14 describes her experiences with a technology-based, COVID 19 era, curriculum purchase:

> *I have a curriculum; it's online, that I have to use for English, and my students absolutely hate it. My parents absolutely hate it, and I absolutely hate it. However, a lot of money was spent on it, so they would have it during the pandemic, and they are continuing to use it.*

Each of these anecdotes are opportunities involving parent concerns with curriculum choices where participants could have described moments of upset parents about Critical Race Theory or its related concerns in classrooms, but the majority of participants simply lacked experiences regarding race or gender issues at all, let alone mention any experiences involving restrictive education legislation. Even though an absence of evidence does not imply an absence of upset parents about curricular choices, Participant 17 explains that when parents in his community are

upset, they have social media as a platform on which to make their complaints known, yet they are more concerned with local needs associated with the school calendar:

> *We have this thing called the Facebook Community Board, and that's where all the angry parents live, and that usually, if they're upset, it's, it's about an administrative policy, you know? Like deciding to do snow days or deciding to cut the school year on this week instead of that week and it's messing up their family vacations. It's not so much like they're suspicious of us as teachers.*

This quotation is emblematic of several aspects of Participant 17's experiences. First, this teacher is aware of the existence of a social media page where parents voice concerns over decisions made by the school district. Second, this teacher is knowledgeable of the types of issues these parents tend to discuss. Third, this teacher is thoughtful about the absence of certain issues such as the ones this interview discussed. When Participant 17 describes his minimal experience with restrictive education legislation, his knowledge of the local needs that upset parents discuss on a public social media page seems to be a relevant factor.

Perhaps the most compelling body of data gathered and organized in Sub Theme 2: Community Values Override Legislation involves educators who teach in communities that have their own local gender or racial tensions yet still describe a minimal or lack of experience with restrictive education legislation. Of the five teachers who described gender or racial tensions in their communities, Participant 20 described a heated event made possible by student cellular devices. This teacher conveyed a story involving students who were using racial slurs while a teacher was recorded standing by, appearing to do nothing to intervene. This video was picked up by a local news network. Participant 20 then explains what happened in her community:

> *We're a small town community, you know, we've got a local [City] community [social media] page and things just went wild. Of everybody in the community page, really, just, up in arms and really upset. Lots of comments on the News 9 page and their post of the stories just outraged against why didn't the teacher do anything; they're just standing there. The administration should do this, that, or the other. That teacher should be fired.*

This experience echoes that of the previously quoted experience in which a teacher is clearly aware of what upsets community members as demonstrated by local social media page activity. However, this story goes a step further as it involves local racial tensions, which the teacher describes as:

> *… a big stressor.*

This educator will later be cited as one who has negative experiences with restrictive education legislation; however, she did not describe significant experiences with this legislation as a result of her community's values. In other words, Participant 20 described a lack of experiences with restrictive education legislation despite the presence of race related, education centered conversations occurring among community members. This experience is consistent with the other four participants who described similar contexts.

Another important code from the interviews is the value parents place on their own children's needs. Four participants described moments in which they witnessed parents upset with the district's handling of a situation involving their children. Participant 22 related this story:

> *Usually it is a discipline issue is what they get upset about. 'Well, my baby done this, but this other baby done that and blah, blah, blah.' For example, there was a mother just the other day, and this didn't have anything to do with me, but I was involved in the conversation. Her son literally assaulted another student from behind, came up behind him and assaulted him, and the police were involved. This kid got charged, had to go to court. She goes to social media and just says how unfair it is that her kid got suspended and all that stuff, and that other kid only got like two days or something… Anyway, it's that kind of a deal when, you know, they, like, discipline's unfair… That's most of our issue.*

This account repeats how teachers are aware of what upsets parents through posts published on social media pages; and furthermore, it captures that some rural parents are fighting for what they believe are their children's interests. However, the large majority of interviews did not

relate stories of parents voicing concerns about classroom occurrences involving content prohibited by restrictive education legislation. Clearly, rural parents value student needs, but protecting students from prohibited gender and race issues does not seem to be a prevalent concern.

A lack of parental involvement was the final code that suggested community values overrode legislation concerns. Only four participants specifically mentioned the lack of engagement from parents, but their experiences are clear. Participant 17 explained:

> *I've had some [parents of students] who are just not interested, you know? It's not that they're against us, they just don't want to be bothered.*

It is possible that these parents who Participant 17 describes have values or needs that ought to be more accurately categorized among the previously detailed codes or even new codes, but it is also possible that some values of rural community members may simply be a lack of value in education. This is suggested by Participant 12 who states:

> *Especially in rural areas, it is hard to get parent support.*

More will be discussed later about the contextual impact rural communities have on teachers' experiences with restrictive education legislation, but as of now, regardless of the reason, the data suggests some rural parents are not interested in engaging with schools about issues related to restrictive education legislation. As a result, it seems this lack of concern may be passed on to teachers who value the opinions of their community.

Sub Theme 3: Practical Education Concerns Outweigh Policy

Both of the first two sub themes suggest rural teachers have minimal experiences with restrictive education legislation because other people who influence teachers may not be

prioritizing restrictive education legislation. Sub Theme 3: Practical Education Concerns Outweigh Policy serves as a transition from these external influences to more internal influences as this sub theme captures the practical concerns teachers are choosing for themselves to handle even though they are still impacted by external factors. This implies that the following concerns may not be objectively more practical than implementing the requirements of restrictive education legislation or even practical at all; however, to refer back to the constructionist epistemological stance undergirding this phenomenology, the following findings seek to capture the lived experiences of teachers priorities as they describe, to them, practical concerns that outweigh policy.

In order to understand the context for the practical concerns occupying the attention of rural teachers, it is helpful to return to the first question again that asked participants if they had any race or gender related school policies that affected their work. As previously stated, all 24 participants answered this question in the negative, but many proceeded to explain their answer. While many described a lack of guidance or school policy from district leadership, as detailed above, 18 participants proceeded to describe a general lack of discussion, knowledge, or issue involving race, gender, or Critical Race Theory in their worlds at all. Participant 10 explains the topic of gender in her school:

> *It doesn't affect this particular small school. [Pause] No, it doesn't affect this one. I know some people that it affects, but they're not in my school… We were treating people equally anyway. Like [laughs], what are you talking about? It's kind of what I feel like that [the state legislature is] putting a spotlight, and I know that [the state Superintendent of Education] has done that with the [Urban City] schools. I know that he likes to highlight them and point out all of their misgivings, but it doesn't really affect our school.*

This quotation introduces political opinions, which will be discussed in Sub Theme 5: Political Views, but it also deftly captures an awareness of the gender conversation happening in the

greater education world as it also captures an absence of experiences with these topics affecting her in her school. Participant 9 expresses similar sentiments about the issues prohibited by HB 1775 for herself and her friends who are teachers:

> *Yes, like, I've heard about it. Like, it's on the news a lot, and it's so crazy, because, like, I have a lot of teacher friends in like, Texas and Oklahoma that hasn't done a thing like that. We don't think about that in our day to day, especially as far as curriculum or like, what our teaching goals are. Yes, like, there is that [left leaning curriculum] bias I mentioned earlier, but as far as our teaching goals, like, 'Oh, I need my kids to understand text structure'. Like, Critical Race Theory or whatever does not factor into that at all with anybody… So, it's so crazy because it's like, and it may be different in other states that are union, but as far as my experience, in the experience of like my friends who teach, that is not a thing.*

Not only does this account suggest an absence of Critical Race Theory as a factor as she decides what to teach students, it introduces the types of practical education concerns that outweigh policy mandates. For this teacher, helping her students understand text structure is a more pressing concern on which to dedicate energy.

Participant 9 is not alone as a teacher who is interested in meeting the specific educational needs of students, which does not include interacting with the prohibited topics of restrictive education legislation. Participant 7 shared about a time when she thought a school policy restricting her capacity to intervene to help a student might hurt a student. As a result, she ignored the policy and explained:

> *I came in to help, and I'm like, 'I'm going to help this kid. I don't care that he hasn't got all his paperwork yet. I can't let him fail now, because if I let him fail now, junior or senior year, he's going to be so far behind, he can't catch up and can't graduate." Next week, the paperwork was through; everything was fine, but I'm really glad to stand more with my parents and these special needs students than I am with policy.*

This anecdote is a helpful depiction of several teachers' experiences. Participant 7 is aware of relevant restrictive policies on her ability to provide services to students, and she is not afraid to ignore policy if it means the best interests of a student are met. However, the prohibitions of

restrictive education legislation, like HB 1775, are much less of a priority than other practical education academic concerns.

Besides academic concerns, student behavior appeared in the data as a practical education concern that outweighed state policy even when the student behavior was on topics related to race and gender. For example, Participant 18 described conversations he occasionally hears from students:

> *There's conversations about gays, lesbians, you know. Anything related to gender type issues outside male and female I tell them that it's inappropriate and we shouldn't be talking about it here in class, and we're not, it's not, it's, it's a distraction to the curriculum that I'm supposed to teach you. And that's how I address it. And the same thinking when they bring up the other stuff.*

Here, Participant 18 demonstrates that his primary concern is teaching his curriculum, which means a secondary concern is mitigating negative student behavior that inhibits his ability to accomplish his primary concern. Both of these priorities outweigh concerns over implementing requirements of restrictive education legislation.

Two participants specifically mentioned prioritizing the improvement of school report card data and student achievement. When asked about what really matters, Participant 11 replied:

> *Yeah, the gender stuff, the Critical Race Theory, like, all these things that we're really worried about, in the scheme of things, it's not, it's not going to teach them to read. That's not, our literacy scores are embarrassing.*

This quotation does not say that the prohibitions of restrictive education legislation are untrue or unimportant; rather, they simply become outweighed by more pressing practical education concerns.

Lastly, four participants specifically mentioned special education concerns as more important than restrictive education legislation. Participant 14 bluntly explains:

> *I'm going to tell you right now for special education, paperwork is, is number one in importance beyond anything else.*

One of the trends that emerged from teachers who work with special education populations is a keen awareness of the law. These teachers expressed deep understandings of what they are legally expected to do, allowed to do, or prohibited from doing. However, none of these teachers expressed that restrictive education legislation presented them with new expectations that outweighed their other, more practical education concerns. To illustrate this, Participant 7 explains one piece of proposed legislation that presented a much greater concern:

> *One of the policies [OK SB 1017], special ed that has come down recently that does affect us: state testing. And, they wanted to make a law that said if you are in self-contained classes, then you have to take the alternative placement test and get an alternate diploma. What that would give them, what an alternate diploma means for special ed is that you get the piece of paper, it says, 'Hey, you graduated', but it's not an official diploma. It's just, so that's how you graduated. It's like a certificate, like a certificate of completion or something, but not a diploma. I have four kids who did not qualify to take the alternative placement, and I had two that did. And they, the law wanted all of my kids to have to take the alternate placement and get this diploma, this alternate diploma. We fought that with the parents' help. I emailed the parents. I said, 'Look, this is what's going on; this is what you need to do'. I had my parents sign off on it We sent that up to the Capitol and they're like, 'Oh, well, maybe then they don't all need an alternate diploma. It wasn't just me, but it was special ed teachers across the state doing that, but my parents needed to know what was happening. I wasn't going to just accept that blindly, and go, 'Oh, now we're all going to take alternate assessments", even though they could do better.*

This anecdote captures the deep awareness that teachers who work with special education populations have regarding the law. Participant 7 demonstrates both political awareness and political activism in the form of recruiting stakeholders to represent their interests at the Capital. And still, restrictive education legislation is not prioritized highly enough by many teachers to outweigh these other more practical education concerns.

Sub Theme 4: Professional Identity Preservation

As the first two sub themes depicted how the opinions of others influenced teachers' experiences with restrictive education legislation, and the third sub theme demonstrated how external factors influence teachers to select priorities other than interacting with restrictive education legislation, Sub Theme 4: Professional Identity Preservation is firmly planted in the teacher's own value center. While a teacher's values are undoubtedly affected by one's lived experiences involving other people, the following data was presented in the interviews as originating from the participant's own education principles as opposed to originating from external influence. Each of the following codes demonstrates education related values that teachers express as principles used to guide their classroom decision making rather than engage with the requirements of restrictive education legislation. It may be safe to understand the following findings as each teacher's beliefs about what constitutes good teaching.

The first code within this sub theme captures 14 teachers who prioritize teaching historical truth or facts. Participant 7 clearly states this principle:

> *When I teach things to my, even to my special ed students, we do history and teach Civil War. We go through slavery. I'm not going to ignore it. I'm not going to say, "Oh, they were just here; they worked". We're going to get into it, and it's hard on my kids. It's hard on me to teach it, but that's who I am. I am a history person, and so [a parent observer] loved how we were teaching the Civil War. We weren't sugarcoating it. We weren't making it one side better than the other. This is the facts for this side. This is the facts for that side, and that's what we do.*

A parent who was interested in the way this teacher was teaching the American Civil War was welcomed into the classroom to observe how the material was presented. While some teachers may have changed what or how they taught sensitive material, Participant 7 unashamedly taught what she believed was historical fact. This example suggests some amount of the rural teaching community has a lack of experience with restrictive education legislation even when parents of students are in the room. This demonstrates how belief in a principle such as objective historical

truth can be an external guide just like guidance from administrators, the community, or practical needs. There is, however, a clear shift with this sub theme toward a more personal source of guidance. For the educators who value being good teachers through good teaching, individual definitions of what is good arise, which is reflected in the interview data. After mentioning several topics related to race and gender, Participant 9 states:

> *I just try to have common sense.*

This simple sentence represents much of what follows in this sub theme. For the previous quotation with the teacher presenting information on the American Civil War, she consulted some version of what she believed to be common sense, but it is just as likely that another teacher would have experienced restrictive education legislation differently through what they believed to be common sense.

As 14 teachers in the interview set relied on their interpretation of historical truth or fact to guide their teaching, five teachers described reliance on their curriculum or state standards. Participant 18 describes:

> *I am not totally familiar with every part of that bill and how it would affect my science teaching or what I've been teaching or how I've been teaching it. We use a particular book, and I got it right here. [Name of Textbook] is our textbook and we got these last year. It was brand new, so with using [Name of Textbook], I don't think that we have any conflict with that critical race bill of 1775. At least I haven't seen, I haven't noticed that that impacted my ability to teach what's in the curriculum or the state standards.*

This experience suggests a couple items. First, this teacher has a cursory knowledge of the restrictive education legislation, but has not felt motivated to understand it more deeply, because second, his district purchased textbooks that he relies upon. When this teacher was asked how he was affected by this law, he says he does not know how it affects his teaching and immediately begins describing his textbook as if to say he trusts his textbook, curriculum, and state standards

to guide what ought to be taught in the classroom as opposed to legislation. Participant 18's interview revealed a competent dedication to teaching well, and he has decided that teaching well means teaching committee approved resources.

Four teachers also mentioned their curriculum but described a bias present in these resources. For teachers like Participant 9 who mentioned the need for common sense, maintaining vigilance towards and potentially resisting curriculum bias is an important way they preserve their professional identity. Participant 17 described his experience with his textbook:

> *This is my first year in the curriculum with seventh grade. As we get to the end of the year, it does talk a lot about weather patterns and climate, and I haven't gotten to, honestly, I haven't got into the details of reading the entire textbook yet, but I get the sense that there is as a big push for like, you know, as humans, we need to be responsible for, you know, minimizing our impact and not affecting the climate too much. You know that there's undertones of that in the textbook. But as far as the way I present the curriculum, it's, I try to keep it with, you know, just the facts and the biology side of it, which would go to evolution, that's going to be an eighth grade skill. And so, that's someone, someone else's problem to wrestle with, right?*

This teacher's viewpoints toward what to teach clearly fit with the 13 others who value teaching historical truth and facts, but this quotation also captures an awareness of curriculum bias in the form of promoting an environmental activist agenda. Rather than blindly teach this perceived goal, this teacher resists the included bias in the way he presents material to students. He also describes this process of determining how to factually present the curriculum as a struggle as implied by the term "wrestle" that he uses. A desire to decide for oneself what is right lies at the core of several teachers' professional identities.

Besides teaching historical truth and teaching curriculum, 6 teachers expressed minimal or lack of experience with restrictive education legislation because they were more interested in teaching students to have respect and be kind. Participant 21 explains:

> *Really what I've done on the Critical Race Theory in my classroom, I mean, I haven't really paid as much attention to it. I mean, it's, [pause] for me, we're going to teach each other how to respect each other. Everybody's the same. Everybody… Teach kids how to be kind, to each other. We're all the same. We all need to treat each other with respect.*

Not only does this description clearly suggest that teaching respect and kindness is more important than teaching or not teaching the Critical Race Theory that HB 1775 is restricting, this also captures the personal nature of the decision. This teacher did not say that her administration or the community told her to prioritize kindness and respect over following restrictive education legislation; rather, she pauses and explains how she decides for herself what to teach. Her professional identity is marked by teaching respect and kindness, not discussing Critical Race Theory.

Furthermore, promoting critical thinking skills was a priority for 6 teachers. Participant 13 is an English teacher who centers her professional identity around critical thinking cultivation in this way:

> *My 12th grade English class, we focus on curriculum and world events, current events, because my job is to help kids figure out critical thinking, to figure out what the biases are, what they're trying to talk us in. Is it persuasive? As we use a lot of real world news reports for lack of better things to help the kids figure that out because they're fixing to go to college, and not everything is easy or safe in today's world for them to have opposing ideas or questions on, because it's our world, unfortunately… I've tried to turn my senior English class, especially when I have my college kids come in to have class discussions, to a place to safely discuss that. Whatever side they take on whatever issue it is, whether it's education based or otherwise, I usually try to find the other side so they're getting multiple perspectives, and it's very hard for a lot of them to understand where my true feelings are based on those, and a lot of times I really don't care unless it affects me, but the kids need a safe place to have those discussions and that's what I try to have.*

This teacher intentionally invites students to discuss sensitive topics and embraces opportunities to argue from opposing viewpoints in order to help students practice their critical thinking. None of this would be possible if this teacher believed restrictive education legislation was more important than critical thinking. However, like the others in this sub theme, this teacher has

minimal experience with restrictive education legislation because of a professional principle she values.

Five teachers expressed preventing explicitly stated personal beliefs from entering their classrooms. For example, when asked how aligned she felt on issues related to restrictive education legislation, Participant 6 replied:

> *I feel like for the most part, we're all pretty on the same page, we do have some… who are more on the left-hand side of it where they're like very pro everything on that side. There was one teacher who, she is very vocal about, like, Black Lives Matter movement and all of that inside of her classroom, which I just, I don't feel like that's part of school necessarily.*

Notice that this teacher does not state what she personally believes about the Black Lives Matter movement; rather, she simply believes personal political stances should not be promoted or discussed in the classroom. Likewise, five teachers expressed an intentional avoidance of topics related to politics, race, gender, or sex. For example, Participant 22 explains:

> *I intentionally avoid those subjects, because again, I'm an old guy. I don't know how that works. I don't want to get in any trouble with it, particularly, my particular field. Gender, race, none of that stuff really mattered. Can you do the work or can you not? And that's where I'm at with it. So I had [pause], until somebody comes to me directly and says, "You have to do this or you have to do that", I'm going to have class like I've always had class.*

Both of these sets of teachers have opted to avoid engaging in the classroom with the topics mentioned or connected with restrictive education legislation. Ironically, these are exactly the teachers one might expect to agree with the legislation. It may be that these teachers felt like they were already aligned with the restrictive education legislation, but since they already hold the belief that certain topics are inappropriate within the classroom, they wouldn't describe, for themselves, more than a minimal experience with the restrictive education legislation.

One side note: two of the five teachers who believe certain topics should be avoided were also among the teachers who believe in promoting critical thinking in their classrooms. For example, Participant 13 who was quoted above explaining the importance of critical thinking in her classroom later said:

> *Sexual stuff, explicit stuff, we don't discuss. It's not my business. I don't want it. No. Is it safe, you know, if we're talking, one of the conversations was about the suicide pods. And how am I supposed to ignore that? I've got young adults and adults in senior English who are curious about why people would go commit suicide. So we start talking about it because that's something that's in the real world. They're teenagers. They're 17, 18, 19 years old. Some of them have gone through it themselves. They've got to understand that it's okay to talk about it, and if they need help, it's okay to go look for help. I guess I don't have a whole lot of guidelines because I haven't had to come up with a whole lot of guidelines as long as they are truly looking for information or to have a discussion and not just to be, excuse language, assholes.*

In a single section of the interview, this teacher mentions emphatically avoiding sexual content in the classroom with the rationale that she does not want to discuss this content. Then she immediately proceeds to explain that discussing how some people in the world want to end their lives, which, to her, is an appropriate and safe topic to discuss, because it is in the real world and relates to the lives of students. It is likely that if this apparently contradictory line of reasoning was presented to the participant to further explain that a reasonable explanation could be given; however, the point is clear nonetheless. This teacher consults her own personal judgement about what is appropriate for class discussion, and she does not feel like restrictive education legislation has prompted her to change what content is allowed in her class or to create guidelines to govern such decisions. Ultimately, rural teachers, such as this one, trust their own judgement and value their professional identity over restrictive education legislation

In contrast to these teachers, a few teachers mentioned allowing students to explore sensitive issues. During a research unit, Participant 19 describes:

> *We're going to do modern stuff, and I'm going to send my kids to research and find examples of, like, 21st century things that connect to this, whether it's gender, race issues or gender issues, violence, war, the things that are happening right now, because I want them to be the one to choose those concepts and pull those into conversation.*

This teacher explained how she deliberately pairs texts and selects excerpts from texts to provide her students with opportunities to engage with issues such as trauma and violence because these topics are of interest to students. Another teacher may consult their common sense and draw different lines determining what is appropriate, but this teacher allows students to research what they feel is important to discuss. Like the others who have been described thus far, this participant is also not engaging with the content prohibited within restrictive education legislation; however, she is also not afraid to allow students to potentially research, learn about, and discuss topics that may be legally prohibited.

Lastly, four teachers spoke to an open professional stance about this subject matter. Participants 10 explained:

> *I think that we got to be reasonable, and we got to understand that everybody has rights. Everybody has beliefs, and everybody gets to, you know, we can't impede other peoples' rights.*

Arguably, a stance like the one described here is impossible to enforce because of the absence of guidelines; however, it represents a general feeling by several rural teachers. It seems that everyone has their own understanding about what is or isn't appropriate to discuss in the classroom, but the one element that unites everyone within this sub theme is the belief that the individual teacher decides what to include or not include in the classroom because of their own integrity that they uphold as a part of their professional identity.

Sub Theme 5: Political Views

While the first four sub themes flowed neatly together, the remaining two may be understood as likely affecting the first four sub themes. Sub Theme 5: Political Views seems to be a prerequisite factor that affects experiences a teacher may have with restrictive education legislation, but the experiences in this sub theme may also be understood as stand alone reasons for teacher's minimal or lack of experience with restrictive education legislation. For example, three teachers clearly exhibited strong political awareness. Participant 23 has 22 years of experience and made this brief note about herself:

> *I've done this so long, and I'm like, all about the law.*

This teacher continues to discuss her experiences teaching sensitive topics in a US History class and demonstrates an understanding of laws that impact her teaching journey. Additionally, Participant 14 senses an increase in teacher political awareness since the COVID 19 pandemic:

> *I think we're kind of coming out of our pandemic fog that we were all in, and we're starting to pay a little more attention to what is happening around us and starting to realize that we do have a say. We do need to speak up and voices should be heard, whereas for a while we were all very quiet and isolated, and it was real easy to sneak bills and laws in without people realizing it or understanding or researching, and I think that we are coming out of that fog.*

Both of these statements speak to an awareness of political developments, which is a prerequisite for other political views. For example, five teachers described how they felt education as a whole has become over politicized. Participant 9 stated:

> *I feel like education has just become too politicized, and I just think that it should be, kids should have access, kids should have access to, like, the whole story, not just, like, the right or left.*

For teachers like this, restrictive education legislation is interpreted as an unnecessary development that is suiting the needs of opportunist politicians who are exploiting education conversations for personal gain rather than addressing important needs. When asked about HB

1775, Participant 13 explains that she doesn't remember its specifics as clearly as she did in the recent past because:

> *It's not in the news all the time, so I'm not getting bombarded with, 'Oh my goodness, look at this shiny new quarter' whenever it's not part of my curriculum.*

To say it another way, Participant 20 described the reason HB 1775 was passed this way:

> *I think we passed a law because we could hit the buzzwords and then we're like, 'Okay, you have to do this now'.*

Both of these teachers imply that the restrictive education legislation discussed lacks merit and simply utilizes temporarily popular terms to get attention. A few teachers went further by explaining how legislation like this is part of a greater campaign to accuse teachers of promoting political ideas. Participant 3 describes the climate into which HB 1775 was first passed into law:

> *At the time, teachers were really being bashed with this assumption that we are turning our five-year-olds into lesbians, and, like, there was some belief system out there, I guess, that that was what we were doing. I mean, we don't have time for that to be really honest, and nor would we ever, like, I don't understand why that got, [pause]. I know it sparked a lot of anger in the teaching community. It made us really question if our legislators were actually legislators paying attention to what we were doing, or if they were focused on, like, a one-time isolated incident.*

All of these statements make similar suggestions about the way many rural teachers perceive the way politics are out of touch with their current education reality. Because of this political stance, teachers are not valuing restrictive education legislation and therefore lack experiences with it.

Other rural teachers also lack experiences with restrictive education legislation, but for quite different reasons as affected by their political views. Four teachers described a lack of political activism in their communities. Participant 10 explained:

> *Most of the people that I know don't go vote. They don't know who their representatives are. They don't know who's on their school boards. They might know the name of their teacher and the name of their principal, but past that, they don't know much.*

In the same way that political activism was a prerequisite for several political views affecting teachers' lack of experience with restrictive education legislation, the lack of political activism described here can be understood as the soil from which the following two political views grow. Four teachers described indifference toward Critical Race Theory even though they were generally aware of what the theory regarded. Participant 11 discusses Critical Race Theory and HB 1775 through a political lens:

> *I know that it's controversial. I know that some people are like, super, super for it. I know some people are extremely against it. I think for me, as a personal opinion, I'm somewhere that I could ride on this. I was with all these things in general when you go to the left or to the right on things. I can see the logic, I guess, on both sides of the table, and I mean, that's all I want to say to that. It's just such a topic that it's just controversial and I don't, I don't think I have an answer for you.*

In this explanation, the participant avoids committing to a favorable or opposed stance regarding Critical Race Theory related laws. She explains that she can ride on this topic meaning it is not an issue about which she is choosing to take an interest suggesting a lack of experience with restrictive education legislation. This stems from a belief that the discussed restrictive education legislation is an unimportant political issue rather than an important political issue or simply an important issue unrelated to politics.

While teachers like Participant 11 choose to not be politically active on this topic because of indifference on the topic, two teachers also demonstrated a lack of political activism; however, they viewed restrictive education legislation as relating to liberal issues, which to them, are naturally avoided. Participant 9 describes her political context:

> *I know that, like, the county we're in voted, like, red. It's like a red county, and I know that they had, like, a mock election, and Trump won. So, I don't see those kids, like, super involved in and advocates of DEI or, like, thinking through that lens.*

This political contextual description followed a question asking about how teachers in her school may be experiencing race or gender related school policies. Her response suggests that the conversation about race and gender policy is inherently a political conversation as well as a liberal, rather than a conservative, topic. To teachers like this, restrictive education legislation may be aligning with their views, but since it is prohibiting conversations that they would not be having anyway due to their political views; therefore, they have avoided experiencing the legislation altogether.

Sub Theme 6: Context

This last sub theme of the first theme captures statements of teachers who have minimal or lack of experience with restrictive education legislation and who provide descriptions of their context as justification for why the prohibitions of the law are irrelevant or do not apply to them. Most of these responses may be understood as assumptions with minimal prior consideration as opposed to experiences discussed in the following theme of teachers who have thoroughly considered the law and chosen to disregard it. 11 teachers described the subject matter or grade levels they taught as reasons why restrictive education legislation did not affect them. Participant 15 explained:

> *I mean, I know this obviously, the social studies teachers are feeling it, but in math, I mean, math is, and that's the other thing I love about math. It's concrete; it doesn't change. It's really hard to be prejudiced when you're talking about a squared plus b squared equals c squared, you know? So I feel like I can talk about math. I don't have to stress about what I'm saying or who I'm making feel bad about them, their background, you know? So, I don't really feel a policy is impacting math teachers right now.*

This statement suggests that some teachers assume restrictive education legislation more acutely affects teachers who teach certain subjects, but this teacher did not express the age of students as

a relevant factor. Conversely, some teachers assume restrictive education legislation does not affect them because of the age of the students they teach. Participant 1 explains:

> *As far as my elementary school, it really just didn't, it wasn't a, [pause] I mean, my kids are four. If they can recognize the flag we're doing good.*

This teacher does not frame restrictive education legislation as pertaining to certain subjects over others; rather, she assumes her students are too young to be affected by the law. Interestingly, another participant also teaches this age of student and believes that restrictive education legislation does affect young elementary students; so, assumptions about the disqualifying effects of subject matter and grade level are not universally held among even the sampling of this study. More on this teacher's experiences will be discussed in the second theme.

Another contextual factor given by eight teachers was their rural context. Participant 17 attributes his lack of experience with restrictive education legislation to the size of his town:

> *I feel like we're, so far, been pretty well protected from, from a lot of those issues just because of the nature of being in a small town.*

This teacher explains that the rights protected by restrictive education legislation are not currently at risk because of living in a small town and limits the need for this type of legislation in his area. Similarly, Participant 7 suggests the distance of her community from a major metropolitan area as a reason for her lack of experience with restrictive education legislation:

> *It takes a while for things to trickle down to [Rural Town], you know? Things that happen up in Oklahoma [City] area, they feel it a whole lot sooner than we do down here… It takes a while for those kind of policies to trickle unless it becomes mandated that you must implement this by this date. It takes a while for things to trickle down because we'll see how it affects other schools before we implement some stuff like that.*

This experience does not clearly imply that restrictive education legislation is important or not important in rural areas, but it does suggest that rurality may be related to experiences captured

in Sub Theme 1: Administrative Support Variability. In this first sub theme, administrators seemed to be aware of the lack of state government enforcement of restrictive education legislation. This quotation suggests that rural teachers may also perceive a lack of enforcement from the state and therefore give less attention to restrictive education legislation that if they believed people would be enforcing the law.

Lastly, 7 teachers suggested that their specific demographic context was a factor contributing to the lack of experience they had regarding restrictive education legislation. When asked what she knew about HB 1775, Participant 1 explained:

> *Oh yeah, I definitely had heard of it. And, like I said, it just didn't, it really just wasn't something that was going to ever really become a, an issue in our town or in our school. It just wasn't something that [pause]¦ that, well with our, with our population, with our population, no blacks I mean. It really was never going to come up, and if I think, if the kids did bring it up or ask, they would have a discussion about it.*

According to this teacher, the protections or prohibitions granted by restrictive education legislation do not apply in communities without minority populations. As stated previously, rural teachers have predominantly heard of restrictive education legislation that is passed, but understandings of what the law is or is not seem to be involved in a teacher's perception of whether the law is relevant to their particular context.

Theme 2: Negative Experiences with Restrictive Education Legislation

Pre-interview predictors of rural teacher experiences with restrictive education legislation could have reasonably been quite varied. Perhaps rural teachers agree with legislation originating from the political party that represents the majority of their geographic voting patterns. Perhaps rural teachers disagree with legislation that restricts their decision making. Perhaps rural teachers know little about restrictive legislation. Largely, rural teachers seem to know about restrictive

education legislation, but for the reasons detailed above in the first theme, many rural teachers have minimal or lack experience with these laws for multiple reasons. The second most common theme that emerged from interviews of rural teachers was negative experiences with restrictive education legislation captures several rural teacher voices who have negative experiences with restrictive education legislation and as a result experience fear, uncertainty, the need to self-censor and motivation to resist these restrictive policies.

Sub Theme 1: Fear, Uncertainty, and Self-Censorship

Of the 24 participants in this study, 8 rural teachers associated restrictive education legislation with fear. Participant 3's interpretation of Oklahoma's restrictive education legislation is represents the majority understanding of the law:

> *HB 1775 is pretty much scaring teachers and making us question what books we're allowed to read.*

This definition of the law lacks specifics but summarizes the nebulous requirements the law places on teachers. None of the teachers in this study articulated specific or clearly stated reasons for their fear; rather, their descriptions echo a wide variety of what might be. Participant 20 captures this undefined fear:

> *Here recently with fifth grade, we use, we combine a lot of our social studies topics with our reading topics. So we're reading through different passages and things about American history and looking at those things, and we were talking about the Indian Citizenship Act of 1924 a couple of weeks ago and talking about the history of that act and how long it actually, for the rights that were promised at the federal level to be fully recognized at the state level. And there were some things in there having to have, and it's a one pager, it's just fifth grade reading level, just a very brief overview, of highlights of the act and when certain states kind of finally came along, but I had a student say to me when we were talking about the discrimination that was involved and why states didn't want to recognize those federally granted rights. There was a student that said to me, "That's, that's messed up". And I said, "Yes it is," and I knew that we needed to have the conversation, and I needed to be brave enough to acknowledge that and say it out loud, and I was scared to death the whole time. What is he going to say when he goes home?*

> *And I'm not the only one that taught that. There are other fifth grade, you know, our fifth grade reading and social studies teacher. She's the one that we're collaborating on materials and she's sharing it with me. So I'm not alone in teaching it.*

In this passage, the teacher felt obligated to teach by presenting students with texts describing the historical facts associated with a piece of legislation. When a student of their own volition decided that the events of history were problematic, the teacher engaged the student on the topic, which caused fear for the teacher. While the wording of the law does not clearly state what historical content can or cannot be taught, the effect for many teachers is fear. In this case and others, teachers are afraid that a student will go home and misrepresent what was discussed in class. Furthermore, the effects teachers fear are unclear, but they tend to involve fears of losing teaching licenses or teaching positions as Participant 6 suggests:

> *I didn't want my license taken away for accidentally saying something that could be misconstrued.*

This stated fear goes a step further and suggests that some teachers are afraid that they may unknowingly or unintentionally break restrictive education laws by doing or saying something that is misunderstood or misrepresented.

The uncertainty caused by restrictive education legislation may be a contributing factor to the teacher shortage phenomenon. Participant 15 suggested:

> *I think overall the policy is not helping our teacher shortage. That's the biggest thing we've got to address right now. In the state of Oklahoma is a teacher shortage, so anything that impacts a teacher choosing to major in education needs to be, needs to be looked at.*

Earlier in the interview, this participant also mentioned how preservice teachers may experience uncertainty as they decide what subjects to teach if they decide to teach because of the restrictions placed on the field by restrictive education legislation.

All this fear with no clear guidance from the wording from the restrictive education legislation causes uncertainty for teachers as well as the administrators whom teachers look to for direction. One participant described a teacher friend who had questions about teaching Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* to students. Participant 21 described the occurrence:

> *We knew that everything was touchy, and so during that time, that's when [the teacher friend]'s, because everything was just [pause] kind of up in the air and touchy, that's when she asked about teaching that book, and I don't think it's ever been revisited again to be honest. So [the administrator] was like, "Ah, we better not. We better just be careful for now," and that was it.*

Again, the wording of restrictive education legislation does not mention the censorship of specific book titles, but the ambiguity of the law's language causes teachers to be uncertain about what is allowed or permissible in class, which causes fear and negative experiences with restrictive education legislation, regardless of the intention behind the law.

Additionally, one band teacher described pushback from a parent as a result of the uncertainty inspired by restrictive education legislation. Participant 24 shared:

> *Well, during, actually right after the BLM movement, and I think we had just kind of started coming back to school after the pandemic, and it was in jazz band, and I forget what we were working on exactly but it was something swing, I'm sure. And I'm sure it was, I do remember it was towards the beginning of the year. So we're doing a lot of listening, and I think I was just talking about, you know, the blue skill soulfulness like the whole jazz idiom and that style. And this is something I talk about often… Music is a mirror of, essentially, American society, up to a point and the development of it in terms of like, what the, the African-Americans were going through. And so you can kind of see these parallels and like, when this is happening in society, this is kind of what the music's like. When you have a lot of that population who are angry and have angst, you kind of get to this hard bop experimental area, and you hear a lot of that in the music. And I think a lot of the blues and the soulfulness just comes from songs that they sang to keep their spirits up, work songs, spirituals, and really, it was just about as generic as what I said to you. Like, that's pretty much the spiel, but I think because it was on the heals of the BLM movement and then like, blue lives matter and that whole debate that was out there in social media. I think, a kid went home and just, "Hey, what'd you learn at school today?", and he just said, "Yeah, this is what we talked about". And then, a mom called the principal and the principal said, "Were you like giving opinions about Black Lives Matter and this and that?" I was like, "No". So I explained to him like pretty much*

> *exactly what I just said to you. And he's like, "Okay, that makes sense. And I figured it was something like that". And end of story.*

The unifying concept of this story is the prevalence of uncertainty experienced by teachers, administrators, and parents. A parent was unsure what a teacher discussed in class because of an unclear relaying of information from a student to their parents. Then, the parent is unclear about what is acceptable or not under the restrictive education legislation. This teacher did not communicate experiencing worry or fear in this story, but uncertainty was inspired by the legislation.

As the previous quotation indicates, a reasonable response to fear and uncertainty is self-censorship. Participant 20 continues explaining her fear induced self-censorship:

> *I have, I've passed on books for my classroom bookshelves because I was afraid to have a book that talked about racial issues or racial issues that were told from certain perspectives. I was afraid to have them in my classroom. With all of the talk of banning certain books or shutting down libraries that included things that would paint, that would paint Caucasian white Americans in a bad light because of discrimination and historical racism, in that is just, it happened. But things that it, and, because you don't know how somebody else is going to interpret that. Even if I think this is a good children's book, it shows good representation, there's great characters in here. There's some really good lessons and conversations that we could have from this and learn about being inclusive of others, being kind to one another, but is every parent going to see it that way? Or am I going to have the State Department of Ed breathing down my neck or trying to get me fired? Will my district stand with me? If it comes to that.*

Teachers like this feel like they must navigate a landscape of teaching what is historically true or morally right while also avoiding perceptions of breaking the prohibitions of restrictive education legislation. The effect is a chilling of conversations around race and gender issues. Participant 18 simply states:

> *I try to stay away from those discussions when it comes to, you know, the, the different races.*

Notably, self-censorship like this is unclear about what race related discussions are no longer happening. It is possible that restrictive education legislation is accomplishing its purpose by restricting harmful race or gender related conversation, but it is also possible that helpful or necessary conversations are likewise discouraged by the law and students are not receiving a complete academic education from their self-censoring teachers.

Sub Theme 2: Resistance

While about a third of this study's participants described negative experiences with restrictive education legislation in the form of fear, uncertainty, and self-censorship, a notable number of teachers described experiences of resistance in several ways and for multiple reasons. These experiences of resistance seem to build upon negative perceptions of the intent behind the bill. When asked what participants believed to be the intent of restrictive education legislation, a wide variety of answers were provided. Some teachers understood the passing of restrictive education legislation as a response to larger socio-political movements. Participant 8 explains:

> *It almost seems reactionary to me. Like, [pause] maintain the status quo… We had the George Floyd, his assassination, and then there were multiple riots and looting and looting that have been going on and that caused a lot of division amongst people, I remember. And so when I started hearing all these people talking about Critical Race Theory and trying to take out those things and censoring a lot of material, it just seems reactionary, that's all it seems like to me. They're trying to get back to a sense of like, you know, it was so good before. It was so stable… I don't think that's right.*

Here, this teacher believes the intent behind restrictive education legislation is not about students but is about opposing social changes. Similarly, Participant 22 understands restrictive education legislation to be political maneuvering:

> *Well, from my perspective, it was about getting noticed nationally… I think it was more for the publicity than anything else, and it secures that good old R vote.*

This perception, perhaps cynically, writes off the legislation because he believes the intent was for political gain. Others believe the intent is directed toward what students are learning. Participant 4 believes:

> *I personally felt like it was trying to whitewash history.*

Not only does this teacher believe the law is to direct what students are learning, but she also believes that the restrictive education legislation is trying to censor necessary elements of history. This belief begins to hint at whether restrictive education legislation is seen as immoral by those who have negative experiences with it. Participant 3 clearly states her belief along this line of reasoning:

> *What topics we're allowed to discuss with our students, that deeply affects us in the lower grades… and I kind of think that might be the point behind that policy because it's a bad one… We all as a teaching community very much spoke up against it. Pretty much, I don't know anyone who thinks that that's a good policy at any level.*

While this teacher's understanding of how all teachers received this legislation may be objectively too narrow, it captures how this law is perceived by some to be immoral. The context of the interview makes clear that her interpretation that the law is bad is not referring to poorly written legislation. Rather, she mentions the intent behind the legislation as bad.

Since 12 of the 24 participants shared their beliefs regarding the intent behind restrictive education legislation, these descriptions undoubtedly affect the responses captured in the first theme. It is notable that so many teachers have such strong interpretations of the harmful or selfish intents of restrictive education legislation, but so many choose to ignore the law for all the reasons described in the first theme. Only five participants described how they chose to resist this legislation. Participant 12 explained the small ways that she chooses to resist:

> *I'm still doing it like with the whole Black History Month, getting, like, our school stopped, isn't doing it now, [School]'s not doing Black History Month because, it's no longer [sigh] Yeah, so what I've been doing to combat that is I've been putting a fact on the board. Now, I'm not saying that it's Black History Month. I literally am just giving them tidbits of history that they probably won't learn in class, and then I'm using that as a bonus question on their tests and quizzes so that they actually pay attention to it… So I'm just not labeling it like Critical Race Theory.*

Teachers like this may overlap with teachers described in the first theme who continue to teach historical fact, but not all teachers who continue to teach historical fact are consciously resisting the prohibition of restrictive education legislation. This teacher and a few others seem to internalize the risk they face by intentionally resisting restrictive education legislation. For Participant 12, steps to protect herself are taken:

> *I've also made sure to protect myself by being part of [Teacher Union].*

Steps of self-protection seem to flow from fears described in the first sub theme by those who negatively experience restrictive education legislation. Several contextual factors may contribute towards why some teachers are willing to resist legislation despite the risks. Five teachers expressed support for Critical Race Theory, which is the targeted foundation for restrictive education legislation. For example, Participant 24 explains his understanding:

> *I think I have a better understanding that with critical race theory, I mean, just critical theory in general. It's more about theory with the hope of affecting change for the positive in most cases like socially in society And, you know, I just don't think that Critical Race Theory is something that was being taught in public schools to begin with. We might be teaching historical facts, but I don't know that anyone was coming in teaching things with an agenda, at least in my experience, with an agenda to make a change, to make a social change.*

This understanding was shared by others. Not only was Critical Race Theory likely not taught in schools, the theory can be understood as a lens of critique that may help people.

Lastly, one teacher expressed concerns for student safety. Participant 3 laments:

> *We've even had a couple suicide threats even in our lower grades, which is shocking. I'm like, "Oh my gosh, their life's barely started. What are they so down about?", you know? But when you're in the classroom, you see why. You hear stories about their lives. You hear the things that they are very aware of in their lives, and as educators, it is our responsibility to ensure that our children feel safe no matter the color of their skin, no matter their background, no matter where they've come from. It's our responsibility to give them that safe learning environment, and that is policy and required by law in the Constitution that we give them that safe learning environment. And we can't do that if we're not allowed to talk about who they are and where they come from and why we're allowed to all be in the same class together. We cannot do our jobs constitutionally speaking for them.*

This teacher describes a great burden of responsibility to protect students. She also suggests that restrictive education legislation deprives minority students from experiencing belonging in classrooms, which inspires her to resist. There did not appear to be any contextual factors that teachers who resist restrictive education legislation had in common.

Theme 3: Positive Experiences with Restrictive Education Legislation

The last of the three themes captures those who have had positive experience with restrictive education legislation. This theme was by far the least supported by experiences from participants in this study; however, these experiences are undoubtedly present and capture positive experiences with restrictive education legislation. Additionally, this theme could likely be understood without the presence of a sub theme, but the structure has been retained for this theme for consistency of organization and ease of understanding.

Sub Theme 1: Agree with Restrictive Education Legislation

While it seems intuitive, two participants confirmed what would logically follow the previous two themes. Theme 3: Positive Experiences with Restrictive Education Legislation is supported by teachers who agree with restrictive education legislation. Participant 9 knew little about the legislation and therefore expressed:

I don't know enough about it, but, like, what you've told me about it, I agree with.

Many of the teachers in this study who had negative experiences with restrictive education legislation expressed fears associated with implications drawn from the legislation as opposed to specific wording included in the bill. It is notable that there are teachers who do not know much about restrictive education legislation, and they agree with restrictive education legislation when given the chance to read the language of the legislation without added commentary from other sources.

However, as stated with previous sub themes, an element of interpreting the purpose of this legislation is important to understanding why other teachers may agree with restrictive education legislation since other teachers are more aware of the greater conversations that have been present around restrictive education legislation. For example, Participant 5 explained her understanding of Critical Race Theory and its place in larger education conversations:

> *The majority of the people in our country, in our area, I truly believe lean very conservative in population, because you add in [Urban] County and [Urban] County with all of those urban schools, it leans more, liberal. And so a lot of the outcry that you hear about how [House] Bill 1775 I believe comes from a lot of those really, really loud voices in those urban districts, because they do not want to be confined about what they teach to those kids, which is again pouring out, and I'm not being negative about liberal. I have a huge appreciation for people having an opinion one way versus the other, and that's what makes our country great is the diversity that we have. They deal with a lot more diversity in those schools, so I understand and commiserate with them, but that doesn't mean I have to agree with them teaching Critical Race Theory in a classroom; I feel we do our students a disservice raising children to, raising children to resent what the country has been and what the country has created. It's a blame game, and that's not what I tell my kids. I tell my kids all the time, "You are responsible for you. You're not responsible for your parents. Your parents are responsible for you to an extent, but at some point, you are responsible for you. The decisions and the choices that you make." So I don't disagree with it. What I think the backlash is is because the majority of voices that you hear are coming from those urban districts that are, are more narrow viewed then and needing, in some ways, needing someone to blame for the problems and issues that we have, and again, I'm very open with our kids, with my kids, with my, you know, my personal children, my students and everything else, and any faculty and staff that wants to visit with me about it, that our country has done horrible things and we've not*

> *done right by certain populations. We've got to come to a better path about how to teach that to our kids versus Critical Race Theory. I think it's a fallacy, and I think there's too much documentation that can prove that it's a fallacy, and raising kids on falsehoods is not in their best interest.*

This passage captures several important elements. First, this teacher is knowledgeable about restrictive education legislation, Critical Race Theory, and the larger political context that is affecting conversations around these topics. Second, this teacher believes that Critical Race Theory is untrue and a harmful framework to use when teaching students. And third, since this teacher disagrees with Critical Race Theory, she agrees with what restrictive education legislation is trying to do, which results in a positive experience with restrictive education legislation. Essentially, this teacher, and likely others, believe restrictive education legislation provides helpful guidelines for teachers as they decide how to provide for students' best interests through curriculum choices. Participant 5 states:

> *I don't agree with Governor Stitt all the time. I don't agree with any of our legislators all the time, but I do agree that there has to be guidelines for our teachers to follow.*

This captures the belief that restrictive education legislation provides clarity for some teachers, which seems to conflict with the experiences of other teachers.

Lastly, one teacher explained how restrictive education legislation protects teachers. Participant 17 explains:

> *I think there are professional development trainings out there that are basically teaching people in all different work, workforces to feel bad about being white because of what our ancestors have done with slavery and things of that nature. And, I don't know that it's always handled appropriately. Yes, atrocities have happened, but I don't think that is something that individuals today necessarily need to walk around feeling shameful about, because it wasn't us, it was, it was someone else. So I think the Governor, state, is probably trying to protect our schools from being given professional development training like that, but I don't know specifically all the details of what those trainings look like, or how bad they are, but I get the sense that that's what he's trying to do.*

Here, this teacher describes a positive experience with restrictive education legislation because he agrees with what he believes the governor was trying to do with the law, which is to protect teachers from harmful professional development. While only one teacher shared this sentiment, it is likely that many others share his perception of what state legislators are trying to do

Main Findings

The analysis of the transcribed interview data resulted in the development of three major emergent themes. These themes suggest a diverse array of experiences with restrictive education legislation. The following themes are organized by order of representation in the data. This means, Theme 1: Minimal or Lack of Experience with Restrictive Education Legislation possesses the greatest support from the interview data followed by Theme 2: Negative Experience with Restrictive Education Legislation and finally with the least support, Theme 3: Positive Experience with Restrictive Education Legislation. The sub themes within each theme are organized in a way that aids understanding of the data rather than remaining constrained by strictly which codes received the most support.

Table 5

Summary of Themes and Sub Themes

Theme	Sub Theme
Theme 1: Minimal or Lack of Experience with Restrictive Education Legislation	
	Sub Theme 1: Administrative Support Variability
	Sub Theme 2: Community Values Override Legislation
	Sub Theme 3: Practical Education Concerns Outweigh Policy
	Sub Theme 4: Professional Identity Preservation
	Sub Theme 5: Political Views
	Sub Theme 6: Context
Theme 2: Negative Experience with Restrictive Education Legislation	
	Sub Theme 1: Fear, Uncertainty, and Self-Censorship

Sub Theme 2: Resistance

Theme 3: Positive Experience with Restrictive Education Legislation

Sub Theme 1: Agree with Restrictive Education Legislation

While another study may make use of quantitative methods to generate data about restrictive education legislation in rural communities, the data captured through qualitative interviews has demonstrated nuanced experiences by rural educators that would not have been recorded through other means.

The most supported theme from this study is that the majority of rural educators have minimal experience with or a lack of experience with restrictive education legislation. This could have been captured through quantitative means, but the depth of experience to explain why rural teachers lack experiences with this legislation is surprisingly diverse. The data gathered suggests that 6 different rural teachers may all state that they have minimal experience with restrictive education legislation, but the implications that flow from this may be incredibly diverse. One teacher was unclear whether she agreed with the restrictive education legislation, but she ignored the law because her administration ignored the law (Participant 7). Another teacher likewise may have agreed or not, but he prioritized what members of his community value first (Participant 18). Another teacher may or may not agree with restrictive education legislation, but she just does not have the bandwidth to think about the law while also addressing other educational needs for her students and school (Participant 10). Still yet, another teacher may believe in a version of the restrictive education legislation, but right off this particular law as political maneuvering while another teacher does not understand why this law applies to their particular context (Participant 13 & Participant 1). And further still, every one of these examples, has multiple

other stories that capture minor and significant experiences to complicate understandings of how rural teachers are experiencing restrictive education legislation.

Most rural teachers do not describe significant experiences with restrictive education legislation, but there are a few who describe significant negative experiences and a few who describe positive experiences with restrictive education legislation. Ultimately, through the interview process, this study uncovered a deeper understanding of how restrictive education legislation is affecting rural teachers, which may inform future legislation decisions.

Summary of Findings

The majority of rural teachers expressed having minimal experiences with restrictive education legislation, which makes up the first theme, Theme 1: Minimal or Lack of Experience with Restrictive Education Legislation. Since the responses within this theme were so prevalent, it became necessary to analyze more deeply to better understand why teachers had minimal experiences with restrictive education legislation. As a result, 6 sub themes emerged from the data that suggest other concerns or voices garner a higher priority for teachers or factors exist that cause teachers to feel like restrictive education legislation does not apply to them.

Following the first theme, Theme 2: Negative Experiences with Restrictive Education Legislation emerged to represent teachers who expressed experiences involving restrictive education legislation and who described those experiences as negative. One sub theme emerged suggesting some teachers with negative experiences described feeling fear, uncertainty, and self-censorship. Some of those teachers and others also described negative experiences with restrictive education legislation and, as a result, described reasons for and methods of resisting these laws.

Lastly, Theme 3: Positive Experience with Restrictive Education Legislation emerged with the least representation in the data but nonetheless clearly existed. This theme can be uniformly understood because all three teachers who had positive experiences with restrictive education legislation agreed with the law, which is notated as its own sub theme with three separate reasons explaining why teachers may agree.

Chapter 5: Discussion

One of this study's major takeaways is the diversity of experiences that exists among teachers from similarly rural contexts regarding the same piece of legislation. Santoro's work is critical for making sense of this interview data. While it is undoubtedly true that some number of people are teachers for the extrinsic or intrinsic motivations described in chapter two, the nature of the education field attracts people who are altruistically motivated to help students or to make the world better. Santoro describes this as a desire to participate in good teaching. It should also be noted that none of the teachers interviewed described their positive, negative, or neutral experiences with restrictive education legislation through an apathetic lens. For instance, no one said they did not care about restrictive education legislation because they were uninterested in teaching well. No one explained that they did not care about restrictive education legislation because they were leaving the profession. Everyone interviewed demonstrated dedication to their work and a desire toward good teaching. Thus, using Santoro's theoretical framework to interpret the interview data was effective.

Minimal or Lack of Experience: Administrative Support Variability

Throughout the interviews, for those rural teachers who described minimal experiences with restrictive education legislation, they repeatedly described who or what they looked to in order to gauge whether they were engaged in good teaching. Several teachers described the

guidance they received or did not receive from administrators. For many teachers, if district leadership was not worried or concerned about the instruction occurring in classrooms, then they also were not worried or concerned. In other words, if administrators believe good teaching is occurring in classrooms, then many teachers trust that assessment and continue to do what they believe they ought to do.

Minimal or Lack of Experience: Community Values Override Legislation

For other teachers, different concerns took priority for them as they sought to accomplish good teaching. The concern most represented in the data is a prioritization of community values. This tended to be a closed system that reinforced local beliefs. 17 teachers mentioned 40 times that they believed the community trusted them. This suggests that as teachers pursue good teaching, they may be looking to their communities for confirmation that they are successful in the pursuit. It is then unclear whether the practices of rural teachers can genuinely be considered good teaching if they look to their community for affirmation when those same communities are looking to their teachers to know what is best.

In addition, several teachers described religious and family values as a priority in their communities. These teachers expressed an awareness of legal reasons for a separation of church and state, but they also expressed an understanding of their community's beliefs, which tended to be more important than what the law required. This suggests that rural teachers tend to be knowledgeable of legal restrictions placed on classrooms, but if tension arises between what the law expects versus what the community expects then priority is placed with what the community values. This prioritization for what the community values also manifests with unique understandings of local needs be they financial, natural, or human in nature.

Minimal or Lack of Experience: Practical Education Concerns Outweigh Policy

The third sub theme parallels the second as teachers continue to describe external sources they reference to gauge success toward good teaching. A majority of teachers interviewed in this study described clear understandings of the true issues that prevented them or others in the school from good teaching. 8 teachers described basic needs of students that were difficult to meet. Four teachers described challenges to fulfilling special education needs. Two teachers described the challenges of student misbehavior, and two teachers described concerns related to school academic performance deficits. Meanwhile, 18 teachers expressed an absence of discussion, knowledge, or issue around Critical Race Theory, Race, or Gender. Applying Santoro's framework suggests many rural teachers are aware of issues that may inhibit their ability to lead good teaching and simultaneously, neither the threat of race and gender conversations nor legislation restricting related conversations are seen as threats to their pursuit of good teaching.

Minimal or Lack of Experience: Professional Identity Preservation

The fourth sub theme is like the previous two in that all three capture descriptions by rural teachers regarding what they believe should be prioritized towards the fulfillment of good teaching; however, this sub theme also contains the greatest diversity of specific beliefs. One way to understand this sub theme is in relation to the trust in teachers captured in the second sub theme. If the community trusts teachers to carry out good teaching, then, as professionals, what serves as the lodestone for teachers by which decisions are made to include or not include, to cover or not to cover class content? Only five teachers were captured in the data as simply consulting their personal judgement in order to know what to teach; however, several others first described believing that what they do is simply common sense, but then proceeded to elaborate on what they believed to be common sense. As they did so, a variety of answers emerged. More

than half of participants believed they should prioritize historical truth or facts. Interestingly, as revealed previously, every participant described at least a basic knowledge of the restrictive education legislation passed in their state; however, 14 teachers still described minimal experiences with restrictive education legislation even though they valued teaching historical truth and facts. This implies that rural teachers either believe that restrictive education legislation prohibits content that is not historically true, or they do not value the law. While a few teachers specifically stated that they were disregarding restrictive education legislation, the majority of teachers in this study seem to believe that teaching historical fact and truth will simultaneously allow them to pursue good teaching and to be in good standing legally as indicated by commitments to various other laws such as FERPA, policies about bible in classrooms, and restrictions on means of communicating with students electronically.

Furthermore, 6 teachers explained how they valued critical thinking. They seemed to believe that it was their responsibility to prepare students for the real world by cultivating the ability to think critically and to think for themselves. These teachers did not seem to believe that their desire to cultivate critical thinking was affected by legislation that restricts the teaching of Critical Race Theory even though the word “critical” is present in both terms. This implies a breakdown of understanding at some level. It is possible these teachers do not have a thorough understanding of CRT and do not recognize that the very critical thinking they seek to foster in students is central to CRT. Or, these teachers may value the cultivation of critical thinking, but they do not believe it relevant to think critically about race or gender issues in their classrooms. Regardless, restrictive education is often not seen as a barrier to teaching critical thinking as is commonly believed to be central to good teaching.

Likewise, 6 teachers described teaching kindness or respect as their most important objective, and five teachers said their job was to teach the curriculum or to teach the standards. Both of these groups of teachers believed that this work was common sense and not inhibited by restrictive education legislation. It is possible that some rural teachers are making a couple of assumptions here. They may assume that the law would not prohibit what, to them, obviously ought to be taught, and therefore, they assume that their current teaching practices are in compliance with the law. This interpretation is supported by Santoro's demoralization framework, because the theory suggests that if these teachers were feeling unable to do what they believed to be good teaching, then they would not describe minimal experiences with restrictive education legislation.

Other teachers also described minimal experiences with restrictive education legislation because of their previously enforced censorship policies. 6 teachers described that it was their policy to keep personal politics or religious views out of the classroom. For these teachers, CRT or restrictive education legislation seems to be considered a personal political issue that ought to be kept out of the classroom so that the teacher can focus on what matters most, which again, is defined differently by each teacher. Similarly, five teachers described their policy of avoiding topics that related to politics, race, gender, or sex. These teachers described instances where students brought up topics, then they proceeded to explain how they viewed their responsibility to redirect these conversations back to what they believed ought to be the focus. Regardless of whether the topic originates as a personal view from the teacher or surfaces from a student, the data suggests that many rural teachers see restrictive education legislation as pertaining to topics and conversations that are best ignored in order to carry out good teaching as a responsibility they have as professionals.

It should also be noted that a few teachers described minimal experiences with restrictive education legislation due to their professional identity preservation, but for significantly different reasons. Four teachers described the value they placed in allowing teachers and students to have their own opinions in the classroom. One teacher specifically explained how students are allowed to study race or gender topics in her classroom if they so choose. For these teachers, good teaching requires students to have the freedom to think and learn about topics that are restricted by recent education legislation. This data implies some rural teachers ignore restrictive education legislation if it prohibits that which is believed to be good teaching. This element in the data is fascinating because it clearly belongs in the category of themes that describe the minimal experiences some teachers are having with restrictive education legislation; however, it would be a mistake to assume that these teachers are indifferent to the legislation as is largely represented by others who assume these legislative restrictions do not affect their interpretation of what good teaching requires.

Minimal or Lack of Experience: Political Views

As suggested in the findings section, Sub Theme 5: Political Views can be understood as likely affecting the first four sub themes as a prerequisite factor that affects experiences a teacher may have with restrictive education legislation. Regardless, the political views of rural teachers is also a large topic worthy of study and can be understood by itself here too. While some teachers conceptualize restrictive education legislation strictly through the lens of its implications for their practice, several teachers primarily understood restrictive education legislation through a political lens. In other words, to some teachers, a discussion about restrictive education legislation was inherently a political conversation. To several of these teachers, it might be accurate to say that restrictive education legislation has minimal impact on

good teaching because the legislation is more about the over politicization of education than about good teaching. A couple teachers directly described CRT as a political buzzword and not a legitimate issue needing legislation. Similarly, some teachers felt that restrictive education legislation was born out of larger political movements. Three teachers felt like teachers were wrong accused of pushing agendas; therefore, their stance toward restrictive education legislation is dismissive because they doubt the legitimacy of the motivation behind the writing of these laws.

There was also a representation in the data of people who considered restrictive education legislation to be a political issue and described their indifference toward what they perceived to be political issues like CRT or other liberal issues. Similarly, four teachers demonstrated a general lack of political activism knowledge. They had heard of restrictive education legislation, they associated it with politics or political movements, but they tended to be intentionally uninformed about the specifics. To them, they had better concerns to worry about than politics.

Minimal or Lack of Experience: Context

This final sub theme of the first theme can be succinctly summarized by the word "dismissive". 11 teachers in the study dismissed restrictive education legislation since they did not think its restrictions applied to them because of the subject matter or the grade level they taught. Interestingly, one such participant who teaches kindergarten thought restrictive education legislation did not apply to her because of the grade level she taught; however, another participant who also teaches kindergarten expressed strong negative experiences with the same legislation. The existence of these two contrasting experiences underscores the inequity of experiences despite similarities in years of experience, gender of the teacher, or grade level taught. Since these two teachers teach within different rural locales, the first teacher in a rural

remote setting and the second teacher in a rural fringe setting, further research may be necessary to understand the difference of experiences even among rural designations with controls for how rural a teacher's school is. Regardless of the potential relevance of rurality, several teachers understood the irrelevance of restrictive education legislation in their context because of what and who they taught.

Likewise, 7 teachers dismissed restrictive education legislation because of the demographic makeup of their students. One participant believed that since all her students were white that restrictive education legislation regarding race or gender was not applicable. This assumption either reveals a lack of knowledge about CRT and what restrictive education is restricting, or it implies a deeper truth about curricular content in some rural areas. It is possible that the elements restricted by restrictive education legislation do not exist in some rural settings because of their racial homogeneity.

Both of these contextual elements, subject matter or grade level taught and demographics, hint at the relevance of rurality as an important contextual factor that may cause teachers to dismiss restrictive education legislation. 8 participants indicated that conversations around race, gender, CRT, and restrictive education legislation simply were not relevant because of where their school was located. Much of this has already been elucidated through the previous sub themes; however, several teachers spoke specifically to their location as the reason they are not concerned with these issues. One went so far as to say that they would be surprised if a representative from the city even knew where their school was. More research could be helpful to unpack this further. This study suggests that rural teachers are primarily preoccupied with issues more endemic to their rural setting; however, there may be an element of protective

isolation that teachers feel. They may not be concerned with legislative issues that they feel will not be enforced due to their location.

Negative Experience: Fear, Uncertainty, and Self-Censorship

Based on empirical research and Santoro's theoretical foundation, this may be the most interesting finding of the entire study even though it is not the most strongly supported. As previously considered, it would be reasonable to guess that rural teachers who are more politically conservative would simply agree with legislation supported by conservative lawmakers. However, previous studies have suggested that teachers will have negative experiences with legislation that restricts what and how they teach. The findings here make significant suggestions toward addressing this gap in the literature.

Due to restrictive education legislation, one third of the participants expressed experiencing fear. This manifested in slightly different ways, but the common experience seemed to revolve around the potential loss of employment. Some teachers were afraid that they would inadvertently say something in class that would be relayed to parents, which would end up getting back to their principal, the department of education, the news, or some combination thereof. Other teachers were afraid that they would not say anything in conflict with restrictive education legislation at all, but then a student would go home and misinterpret what was said to parents, which could lead to loss of employment. Then there were the teachers who felt a responsibility to their students. They feel motivated to do good teaching, as Santoro would say, and therefore say something in class that they felt needed to be said because of one of the reasons captured in Sub Theme 4: Professional Identity Preservation. For instance, one participant detailed in the previous chapter described the intrinsic drive to teach truth and thus the altruistic

need to relay that truth through a conversation about race with a student, but then the teacher describes the fear she felt for what a parent at home might think about that conversation.

One important detail with these three causes of fear is what is absent from the data. None of the participants of this study had any notable personal experience in which fears regarding restrictive education legislation became real. This is not to say that their fear is not real; rather, none of the teachers interviewed had a situation in which their employment was at risk. None of the participants described stories of close friends who lost their jobs as a result of restrictive education legislation. All of the fears described in this study were founded upon what might be because of what had happened to others. Stories were shared about how an urban school district in the state had gotten into trouble as a result of not following restrictive education legislation. Stories were even shared about other race or gender related school issues getting exposure through local news. Even though none of this study's participants had a personal experience like the ones they feared, fear existed nonetheless.

As a result, this fear caused two distinct outcomes in the study. Four participants described uncertainty about what to teach or what not to teach. This includes teachers who have no intent of breaking the law and fear unintentional infringement as well as those who feel driven to do what is right but fear the potential consequences. This aligns with the literature that suggests that this may be the intent of restrictive education legislation, that conversations about race and gender are "chilled" due to ambiguous legal wording (Feingold, 2021). This concept seems to be true for rural teachers according to the findings of this study.

Additionally, 8 participants described self-censorship or increased caution in response to their fear of losing their jobs because of not following restrictive education legislation. Some teachers explained how they passed on free classroom books or explained that they no longer

taught certain books out of fear of restrictive education legislation. Other teachers described their increased caution with what they taught or how they communicated with parents. One teacher described a more thorough list of class texts on her syllabus that parents must sign at the beginning of the year. Another teacher responded oppositely by not disclosing the title of every book she uses in her classroom to avoid potential tension. This suggests that teachers are finding multiple ways to navigate the fear and uncertainty they are experiencing caused by restrictive education legislation.

It should also be noted that all of these descriptions of how teachers are responding to fear and uncertainty through self-cencorship and increased caution seem to be in conversation with the findings of Sub Theme 2: Community Values Override Legislation. Afterall, as detailed previously, teachers tend to feel isolated from state government intervention due to their rurality. The primary manner by which teachers described their fears of employment loss are through responses and actions from parents. If the values and priorities of the community were irrelevant, then these fears may be less represented in the data. Nevertheless, these fears do seem to exist, which place teachers in conflict with multiple priorities. Teachers seem to be navigating tension between a professional responsibility to teach truth and a responsibility to the values of their community. Or, teachers may be experiencing tension between a professional responsibility to teach standards that include race related topics when the community is pressuring the school to improve because of low academic performance. More research is needed to explore the intersection of how rural teachers are navigating these potentially conflicting interests that are vying for teachers' attention while these teachers are potentially motivated by personal definitions of good teaching.

Negative Experience: Resistance

While some participants respond to feelings of fear and uncertainty with self-censorship and increased caution, others tend to respond to restrictive education through resistance. It is interesting to note that only five participants described either their motivation or method of resisting restrictive education legislation. However, half of the total participants described, although varied, a negative perception of the purpose of restrictive education legislation. All of these descriptions are framed as politically unnecessary, potentially harmful, or flat out immoral. The findings suggest that although many rural teachers feel comfortable prioritizing other concerns above restrictive education legislation, the general perception of the purpose of these laws is not positive.

Some teachers seem to be actively resisting restrictive education legislation. One teacher described the diversity of her student population along with the moral responsibility to include restricted content, harkening back to Santoro. One teacher described a responsibility to keep her students safe and pointed to her understanding of an increase in suicide threats from young students who do not seem themselves represented in the curriculum. Again, this teacher, though potentially fearful for her employment, has decided to resist restrictive education legislation because of the value she places on good teaching. This teacher could have been categorized in Sub Theme 4: Professional Identity Preservation under the first theme; however, this teacher represents a notable difference. Whereas some teachers ignore or dismiss restrictive education legislation in favor of their professional priorities, this teacher goes a step further and is consciously aware of the ways in which she is resisting legal expectations.

Lastly, one teacher is resisting restrictive education legislation, not from a moral standpoint, but from a logical point of view. While some teachers notice a lack of specificity in

the wording of restrictive education legislation and feel fear and uncertainty, this teacher saw this as grounds for dismissing the law. According to Participant 23, laws that really matter such as laws restricting how teachers can electronically communicate with students, have specific rules and specific consequences for teachers who break those rules. To her, this is a law worth following because it has clarity, and restrictive education legislation that is unclear about what exactly is prohibited or what happens to those who are not in compliance with the law is not to be taken seriously. This logic may or may not be sound, but it demonstrates a legal thoughtfulness present within the data.

Positive Experience: Agree with Restrictive Education Legislation

The last theme from the data has surprisingly low support. As previously hypothesized, understandings of the values of rural voters would have guessed rural teachers have positive experiences associated with legislation that is consistent with conservative values. That assumption is not well supported by the data from this study. Three of the 24 participants described positive experiences with restrictive education legislation. Two teachers explained why they were against CRT, which they saw to be the primary target of restrictive education legislation. One of those two teachers believed restrictive education legislation provides helpful guidelines to teachers, and one other teacher believes that restrictive education legislation protects teachers from professional development trainings designed to make white teachers feel bad for being white. These interviews tended to be straightforward and uneventful. When asked about the purpose of restrictive education legislation, they shared the above beliefs and also described a lack of conflict around these issues in their schools. They did not feel like anything would change in their schools as a result of restrictive education legislation, but they all believed that it was necessary for other teachers in other schools.

Even though few participants described positive experiences with restrictive education legislation, it is likely that many more teachers feel likewise that is represented in this data. It is possible that rural teachers who feel this way are suspicious of learning institutions commonly understood to be liberal, and it is likely that the university from which the researcher is conducting this research is subject to such assumption. Future research may address this issue more successfully if this is indeed an issue. There is also a tendency for people to be more vocal about that which upsets them than that which they are content, but this is an unlikely cause for the low responses for this theme. Afterall, the vast majority of participants in this study had minimal or lack of experience with restrictive education legislation. That said, everyone who participated in this study stated that they had at least some knowledge of restrictive education legislation. It is likely that there is self selection bias present, and that some number of rural teachers are not familiar with this legislation and opted to not participate in a study about a subject about which they were unfamiliar.

Research Implications

There are notable methodological implications as a result of this study. First, for researchers, very few studies seem to be leveraging Santoro's work with demoralization to interpret the experiences of teachers. This study benefited greatly from Santoro's framework, and future studies ought to build on this work outside of teacher burnout contexts. More specifically, more work is needed to explore the intersection of priorities that guide rural teachers' determination of good teaching as understood by Santoro.

Second, a qualitative design uncovered fascinating experiential data on the phenomena of restrictive education legislation. As detailed at the beginning of the findings chapter, a questionnaire might have struggled to uncover the nuance present behind rural teacher

experiences with these laws. Future research could continue this work by improving on recruitment methods. As suggested above, it is likely that this study did not recruit a representative number of participants with positive experiences with restrictive education legislation, even though all willing teachers were recruited. Perhaps the framing of the study to participants could do more towards better representation in recruitment. It was evident that the human element of a personable researcher seemed to encourage participants to think more deeply and to share more honest responses than the initial responses given at the beginning of the interviews. It may also be possible that rural residents with minimal interaction with institutions of high education may have reservations about the motives of researchers. A qualitative design gives researchers and participants an opportunity to build trust in one another through opening purpose statements and introductory questions, so this study's design has potential for further research.

Third, interview data and empirical data suggests there may be differences among experiences between rural fringe, rural distant, and rural remote residents. This study would have still yielded a variety of experiences had rural fringe teachers been omitted from recruitment, but a general difference between their responses and the responses of teachers in more remote settings was evident. Future research could consider interviewing rural teachers with the goal of capturing the difference of experiences among more or less rural teachers regarding recent legislation.

Fourth, as a long time resident of suburban areas, the researcher did not consider the different relationships people may have with legislative expectations in more rural settings. Statements from a few participants suggest that legislative expectations like restrictive education legislation may be unenforced in rural schools and therefore unimplemented. More research is

needed along this topic to know the degree to which legislative requirements are carried out in areas with little or no state department of education oversight.

Lastly for researchers, several participants in this study work closely with special education populations in schools. As a result, these teachers tended to demonstrate a higher understanding of the law than other teachers. Since there are so many laws regulating special education, these teachers seem to have an above average understanding of the legal system as well as specific laws. This was an asset to the study since these teachers could speak knowledgeably about restrictive education legislation, but it also highlights a difference between regular education and special education teachers. Further research is needed to understand the different relationships special education teachers have with the law compared to regular education teachers specifically regarding restrictive education legislation and the pursuit of good teaching as a motivation.

Practical Implications

This study also presents practical implications for administrators. Administrators play an important role helping teachers navigate legislative expectations. The most well supported finding from the interviews in this study suggests that rural teachers have minimal or a lack of experience with restrictive education legislation because of the influence of their administrators. Several teachers described receiving specific guidance from administrators, which seemed to reassure teachers about what deserved teacher attention from the point of view of administrators. Similarly, many rural teachers could not describe any relevant school policy to help teachers navigate restrictive education legislation; these teachers seem to assume that if restrictive education legislation is not a big enough concern for administrators to announce new policy or to discuss in a meeting or email, then it is not a big enough concern for them to pursue or

understand on their own. It is also notable that a couple teachers described appreciation for the protections that restrictive education legislation provided, which indicates a perceived need by some teachers for the existence of this legislation.

In contrast, a sizable number of teachers described negative experiences with restrictive education legislation. Since many of these teachers described fear and uncertainty, administrators ought to be sensitive to the possible existence of these sentiments. If administrators are assuming that their teachers are not concerned with restrictive education legislation, they are likely correct, but could easily be incorrect. Santoro's work suggests that teachers may be experiencing demoralization and administrators may be unaware. More research is needed to know whether these findings are surprising or not to administrators.

Additionally, since teachers fulfill such a critical function towards facilitating the teaching and learning of students in public school classrooms, their viewpoints matter (Wronowski & Urick, 2021). Findings from this study as well as previous research suggests that the teacher role has become highly politicized, and teachers are affected by this politicization (Pizmony-Levy & Woolsey, 2017). Considering the current staffing challenges schools are facing, the added stress these policies and legislation may enhance is cause for concern. Several researchers have examined the current teacher attrition crisis affecting schools nationwide (Cells et al., 2023; Karsenti & Collin, 2013; Santoro, 2011, p. 2; Worth & Faulkner-Ellis, 2021, p. 18; Zhang & Zeller, 2016). Numerous reasons for the shortage of teachers have been cited indicating that no single cause is to blame (Marin Blanco et al., 2023). Ultimately, this environment may influence the effectiveness and longevity of teachers' careers and therefore contribute to the already existent teacher attrition problem.

Policy Implications

The practical implications fall most heavily for policymakers. This study suggests that the majority of rural teachers are unaffected by restrictive education legislation. If the legislation was enacted to change the teaching of rural teachers, then the data suggests this was not successful. If the legislation was enacted to cause a minority of teachers to experience fear or uncertainty, then the data suggests this was successful. If the legislation was enacted for some other purpose, then this study cannot make any suggestion to their success. Most importantly, if the law is important, then changes need to be made to better communicate that to rural teachers. Assuming that legislators are not intentionally attempting to distress their constituents, this study makes a couple of suggestions. First, legislators ought to study the specific language associated with prohibiting content as discussed in the literature review in this study. When legislation is not explicit, it comes up for interpretation, which can lead to distress by, in this case, teachers who desire to follow the law and are unsure about implementation. Second, restrictive education legislation ought to be consistent with other education expectations such as academic standards. It is unfair to expect a teacher to teacher academic standards that contain restricted content. Consistency is needed. Lastly for policymakers, there are those teachers who have positive experiences with restrictive education legislation. They ought to speak with these teachers to better understand the guidance they experienced from restrictive education legislation so that this may be continued and perfected.

Limitations

The purpose of this research is to gather information on the phenomena of restrictive education legislation experienced by rural teachers by investigating how rural teachers perceive the impact of restrictive education legislation. Since the goal was to capture perceptions of rural

teachers according to their lived experiences, a qualitative research design was used (Aurini et al., 2016). This decision was directly influenced by the way in which voices of rural educators may be lost amid larger data samples that include teachers in urban and suburban areas. As such, certain limitations exist according to research design, data, collection, and analysis.

For example, even though the majority of participants in this study had heard of either HB 1775, restrictive education legislation, or the "Critical Race Theory law", many of them have minimal knowledge or flawed knowledge of what this law prohibits. As a result, several of the experiences that teachers described in these interviews do not reflect an accurate understanding of the law; however, the purpose of this study was not to assess teachers' knowledge of restrictive education legislation. Rather, this study seeks to capture the lived experiences of teachers with restrictive education legislation, which includes how they perceive their work to be impacted by the law. This aligns with points made previously that vagueness in the bill's language may have been intentional; however, this study should not be understood as a study of the accuracy of legal knowledge held by rural teachers about restrictive education legislation. Yet, this limitation should also not be misunderstood as saying rural teachers have no understanding or rampantly flawed knowledge of restrictive education legislation. Merely, the findings of this study are undoubtedly influenced by elements of inaccurate legal knowledge.

Additionally, while Santoro's work has dealt heavily with teacher burnout, this study makes no contribution to this topic. Even though teacher burnout is an important element of the educational landscape, this research design was unable to capture experiences of burnout related to restrictive education legislation. Perhaps future studies will be able to address this potential correlation.

Generalizability is another potential limitation. This study interviewed 24 rural teachers from Oklahoma. While Oklahoma serves as a powerful proving ground in which to capture rural teacher experiences due to the above average number of rural school districts in the state, it may not be representative of rural teachers in different regions. Additionally, thousands of emails were sent to teachers and this study captured the experiences of all the teachers who agreed to participate. Enough interviews were conducted to create a sense of saturation, however, more participants from specifically rural fringe locations would have created a greater sense of trust in the findings for that locale. Future studies could strive to expand the number of interviews conducted and from a sample including participants from a larger geographic area.

Another potential limitation is inherent with the inclusion and exclusion of certain locales. Participants for this study were selected according to the US Census-defined categories of rural-fringe, rural-distant, and rural-remote even though some researchers argue that the inclusion of participants from rural-fringe contexts skews the data by including suburban experiences (Green, 2013; Greenough & Nelson, 2015; Their et al., 2021; Zuckerman, 2019). Since the sample included equal representation from all three US census-defined categories, the analysis process was trusted to identify themes even though they may be different from other locales. Regardless, the inclusion of rural-fringe respondents may be perceived as a limitation.

One of the largest limitations of this study regards the voices who were not captured. For example, teachers who may have left the profession due to restrictive education legislation were not captured because the most consistent way of soliciting participants is by contacting teachers currently employed in Oklahoma. Furthermore, considering the theory that teachers may feel cut off from accessing the moral rewards of teaching, soliciting responses by teachers who have left

the profession may be inherently immoral as it might provoke participants to relive traumatizing experiences.

In addition, since participation in this study was voluntary, bias on the behalf of participants to self-select themselves to be interviewed is possible. This may have also been enhanced due to the nature of this study. Some may inaccurately reduce the premise to political platform buzzwords and therefore feel encouraged or discouraged from participating as a result.

This limitation is furthered by the potential for interviewer bias. Since the researcher has limited experience conducting qualitative analysis, unknown missteps surely abound. There is a chance that questions were written or asked in ways that affected the data; however, the utmost effort was given by the researcher to curtail these potentialities through practice and perpetual self-reflection.

Conclusion

This study has three major conclusions. First, the majority of rural educators do not describe positive or negative experiences with restrictive education legislation. These teachers describe either minimal or lack of experiences with restrictive education legislation and typically provide other concerns or priorities that precede education legislation restrictions. These other priorities include varied guidance from administrative leadership, community values, practical education concerns, preservation of personal professionalism, political views, and contextual factors. Second, For rural teachers who described negative experiences with restrictive education legislation, feelings of fear, uncertainty, and self-censorship were described. There are also examples of rural educators who describe methods of and reasons for resisting restrictive education policies. Third, there are rural educators who described positive experiences with restrictive education legislation. These teachers described opposition to what they believed to be

restricted by the education legislation and explained how these restrictions were helpful protections for teachers. This study provides further evidence for using Santoro's work as a relevant framework for understanding the experiences of teachers and may be useful for future research that seeks to understand the experiences of teachers regarding legislation.

Appendix A: Oral consent

Semi-structured public school educator informed oral consent to participate in research

Dear _____,

I appreciate your time today and your willingness to consider participating in this study of rural educators and restrictive education legislation. This study aims to understand better the perception rural educators have regarding restrictive education legislation. The research uses interview questions to explore the perceptions of rural teachers. If you agree to be included in the study, you will be asked to participate in an interview that will last forty-five minutes to one hour. Your participation is voluntary, and no compensation is provided. Also, the data gathered during the study will not be used in any future research projects.

Your community, your school district, and you will remain anonymous during the research process and final dissertation. Therefore, the risks associated with participation are limited. However, even though no identifiable information is used, deductive identification could occur. The research design limits this possibility by using ranges for descriptive data, anatomizing information, and randomly selecting schools for participation. You are also free to decline answering any question that you believe may expose you to this risk. There are no benefits from participating in this research.

Please note, participation in this research may include close social contact with the researcher. According to the CDC (www.cdc.gov), the virus that causes COVID-19 is spreading very easily and sustainably between people. Older adults and people who have severe underlying medical conditions like heart or lung disease or diabetes seem to be at higher risk for developing serious complications from COVID-19 illness. Our research protocol includes precautions that follow the CDC guidelines and comply with the current state and/or local restrictions on allowable personal interactions.

Also note that audio recordings will be transcribed using an online service not hosted by OU with its own privacy and security policies for keeping your information confidential.

Your participation is voluntary. Even if you choose to participate now, you may stop participating at any time and for any reason. You can reach me at jlowry@ou.edu, and my faculty advisor can be reached at sarahguthery@ou.edu.

You can also contact the University of Oklahoma – Norman Campus Institutional Review Board at 405-325-8110 or irb@ou.edu with questions, concerns, or complaints about your rights as a research participant, or if you don't want to talk to me.

What questions may I answer about this research project?

I want to make sure I have your permission to continue with the interview. So, please answer the following questions:

1. May I have your permission to start the interview? ___Yes ___No
2. May I have your permission to record the interview? ___Yes ___No

If no, then:

3. May I have your permission to take notes during the interview? ___Yes ___No
4. May I have your permission to use direct quotes from the interview? ___Yes. __No
5. Do you want your name reported with direct quotes? (a pseudonym can be used otherwise) ___ Yes ___N

So, remember that your participation is completely voluntary, you don't have to answer any question, and you can stop at any time. If you do choose to participate and then change your mind, you won't be penalized in any way. Finally, if you would like a printed copy of the information, I've just read to you, you are welcome to have this one or we can make arrangements for me to email you one.

Appendix B: Interview questions

Interview Protocol

Introduction

Thank you for your time and willingness to participate. As you know, I am interested in understanding rural teachers' experiences with legislation that restricts what and how teachers can discuss certain concepts regarding race and gender. If the questions are general and abstract, you may volunteer any detail you wish. You also have the option of declining to answer – passing on – any of the questions. Do you have any questions before we start?

Interview Questions

Background Questions

1. Tell me about yourself.
    a. How long have you been teaching? What grade levels/subjects do you currently teach?
    b. Did you grow up in a rural environment?
    c. How long have you taught?
    d. Have you always taught here or in different places?
2. What factors led you to teach?
    a. What led you to teach in a rural environment?

Policy

3. Policy is a word thrown around a lot in school conversations. I like to think of policy as the plan of action a person or group follows. Common policies include dress code policies or cell phone policies.
    a. Are there any race or gender related school policies that affect your work as an educator?
        i. If policies exist and an influence has been experienced,
            1. Describe the intent of these policies.
            2. Describe the effect these policies have had on you.
            3. Describe the effects these policies have on other people at your school.
        ii. If policies exist and an influence has not been experienced,
            1. Describe the intent of these policies.
            2. Describe the effects these policies have on other people at your school.
        iii. If policies do not exist,
            1. Have there ever been race or gender related policies you know about?

2. Have you heard of or been a part of conversations about the possibility of race or gender related policies and what that might mean for people in your school?

4. In 2021, Governor Stitt signed HB1775 into law. This bill prohibits the inclusion of certain concepts related to race and gender. Can you walk me through your experience of implementing this new law in your classroom?
    a. What has been your biggest challenge in putting HB1775 into practice?
    b. What, if any, successes have you had in implementing HB1775?
    c. How has HB1775 impacted your day-to-day teaching practices?

Perceptions and Attitudes

5. What were your initial thoughts when you learned about this HB1775?
6. How have your views on HB1775 changed since you started implementing it?
7. What do you see as the main goals or purpose of this HB1775?
8. To what extent do you feel HB1775 aligns with your teaching philosophy and approach?

Impact on Students

9. How have your students responded to changes resulting from HB1775?
    a. What effects, if any, have you observed on student learning or engagement?
    b. Have you noticed any unintended consequences of HB1775 for your students?

Support and Resources

10. What kind of support or training did you receive to implement HB1775?
    a. What additional resources or support do you feel you need?
11. How have your colleagues responded to implementing HB1775?

Reflections

12. If you could change anything about HB1775 or its implementation, what would it be?
13. What advice would you give to policymakers about developing and rolling out new education policies?
14. Is there anything else about your experience with this policy that you'd like to share?

Closing

Now that we are done, do you have any questions you'd like to ask me about this research project? If you want to contact me later, here is my contact information. Also, I may need to contact you later for additional questions or clarification. Can I also have your follow-up contact information?

Steps Taken to Write Interview Protocol

1. I emailed several experts for help.
    a. Mica Pollock and collaborators regarding “Supported, Silenced, Subdued, or Speaking Up? K12 Educators’s Experiences with the Conflict Campaign, 2021, 2022”
        i. This is the most important publication regarding my work, which highlights my frustration that they didn’t email me back.
        ii. I read between the lines to recreate what they may have asked to arrive at their primary codes “Supported, Silenced, Subdued, and Speaking Up”
    b. Dan Hamlin: “I am not sure about any qual. interview questionnaires or surveys on your topic.”
    c. Angela Urick: “I don't know of any qualitative surveys or protocols.”
    d. Ashley Woo: Woo sent me quantitative survey questions and encouraged me to create a Bento account, which houses tons of quantitative survey questions.
    e. Tim Ford: No response
2. The Rand Corporation analyzed data from the AIRS in “Walking on Eggshells”, which included qualitative interview components, but I can’t find these questions.
3. I searched the Journal of Rural Education looking for a similar study with questions I could adapt, but I failed to find anything close enough to be useful.

Appendix C: *Apriori Code*s and Categories

Codes	Categories
External motivations: Higher salary (Balyer & Özcan, 2014) Good working hours (Balyer & Özcan, 2014) More holidays (Balyer & Özcan, 2014) Job security (Balyer & Özcan, 2014) Social Status (Balyer & Özcan, 2014) Career prospects (Balyer & Özcan, 2014) Governments regard for education (Balyer & Özcan, 2014) Easy to find teaching vacancy (Balyer & Özcan, 2014) Internal motivations: Enjoy being with children/teenagers (Balyer & Özcan, 2014) Challenging nature of the job (Balyer & Özcan, 2014) Enjoy the school environment (Balyer & Özcan, 2014) Fits the teacher's personality (Balyer & Özcan, 2014) Wish to teach the liked subject (Balyer & Özcan, 2014) Opportunities for continuing education (Balyer & Özcan, 2014) Influenced by others: Peers (Balyer & Özcan, 2014) Family (Balyer & Özcan, 2014) Media (Balyer & Özcan, 2014) Teacher (Balyer & Özcan, 2014) Religious beliefs (Balyer & Özcan, 2014) Altruistic motivations: Teaching is meaningful (Balyer & Özcan, 2014) Wish to help others (Client responsibility) (Lortie, 1967) Uphold the profession (Craft performance) (Lortie, 1967)	Reasons for Teaching
Prohibited Concepts: One race is inherently superior to another (Friedman & Tager) An individual, by virtue of their race, bears responsibility for actions committed in the past by members of the same race (Friedman & Tager) An individual should be discriminated against on account of race (Friedman & Tager) An individual's moral character is determined by their race (Friedman & Tager) An individual, by virtue of race, is inherently privileged, racist, sexist, or oppressive, whether consciously or subconsciously (Friedman & Tager)	Critical Race Theory

A meritocracy is racist (Friedman & Tager) An individual should feel discomfort, guilt, anguish, or psychological distress solely because of their race (Friedman & Tager) This state or the United States is fundamentally or irredeemably racist (Friedman & Tager) Character traits, values, morals, privileges, or beliefs can be ascribed to someone based on their race (Friedman & Tager) People cannot treat each other without respect to race (Friedman & Tager)	
Pros of living in a state with restrictions: Family & friends (Goldberg et al., 2024) Job (Goldberg et al., 2024) Where they grew up (Goldberg et al., 2024) Weather (Goldberg et al., 2024) Things to do (Goldberg et al., 2024) Diversity (Goldberg et al., 2024) Cost of living/taxes (Goldberg et al., 2024) Cons of living in a state with restrictions Political climate (Goldberg et al., 2024) Endorsed bills and legislation (Goldberg et al., 2024) Cost of living (Goldberg et al., 2024) Weather (Goldberg et al., 2024) Far from where they grew up (Goldberg et al., 2024) Initial reactions to the law: Fear and worry (Goldberg et al., 2024) Anger and fury (Goldberg et al., 2024) Shock and horror (Goldberg et al., 2024) Sad but unsurprised (Goldberg et al., 2024) No direct impact (Goldberg et al., 2024) Law is reasonable (Goldberg et al., 2024) Law is unenforceable (Goldberg et al., 2024) Feelings over time: Worry and concern intensified (Goldberg et al., 2024) Lack of concern evolved into fear and worry (Goldberg et al., 2024) Worry and concern decreased (Goldberg et al., 2024) Coping with worries: Activism (Goldberg et al., 2024) Social Support (Goldberg et al., 2024) Avoiding news and media (Goldberg et al., 2024)	LGBTQ+ Issues

Therapy and medication (Goldberg et al., 2024) Being more out (Goldberg et al., 2024) Planning for the future (Goldberg et al., 2024) No need for coping (Goldberg et al., 2024) Considering the future & relocation (Goldberg et al., 2024)	
Student learning needs: Scripted curriculum (Santoro, 2021) SPED accommodations (Santoro, 2021) Teacher absenteeism for mandatory PD (Santoro, 2021) Student emotional needs: Secondary to academic growth (Santoro, 2021) Principal intimidation on tests (Santoro, 2021) Student feelings of self worth: School rankings (Santoro, 2021) Supporting vulnerable students: Receive fewer resources (Santoro, 2021) Receive extra pressure (Santoro, 2021)	Sources of Demoralization (Causing Harm to Students)
Colluding with teachers on grading assignments: Teacher ratings (Santoro, 2021) Teacher pay (Santoro, 2021) Pressure from leadership: To pass undeserving students (Santoro, 2021) To improve graduation rates (Santoro, 2021) Communication with leadership: One-directional communication (Santoro, 2021) Disproportionate value given to non-practitioner voices: From inside the school (Santoro, 2021) From outside the school (Santoro, 2021) Rejection of teacher expertise (Santoro, 2021) Rejection of teacher initiative (Santoro, 2021) Threats to due process (Santoro, 2021) Delayed information (Santoro, 2021) Materials: Expensive products and services (Santoro, 2021) Ineffective (Santoro, 2021) Alternative & fast-track licensure programs (Santoro, 2021)	Sources of Demoralization (Degradation of the Profession)

Professional Learning Communities: Inauthentic (Santoro, 2021) Designed to placate (Santoro, 2021) Ineffective colleagues: Fail to pull their own weight (Santoro, 2021) Unwilling to improve (Santoro, 2021) Teacher attrition (Santoro, 2021)	
Personal Correlates: Teacher Characteristics: Age (Nguyen et al., 2019) Gender (Nguyen et al., 2019) Ethnicity (Nguyen et al., 2019) Marital status (Nguyen et al., 2019) Number of children (Nguyen et al., 2019) Career satisfaction (Nguyen et al., 2019) Full time teaching (Nguyen et al., 2019) Distance to School (Nguyen et al., 2019) Teacher Qualifications: Ability (Nguyen et al., 2019) School selectivity (Nguyen et al., 2019) Grad. (PhD v none) (Nguyen et al., 2019) Grad. (MA/PhD v BA) (Nguyen et al., 2019) National Board (Nguyen et al., 2019) Teaching Fellow/TFA (Nguyen et al., 2019) Highly qual. (NCLB) (Nguyen et al., 2019) Internship (Nguyen et al., 2019) Standard certification (Nguyen et al., 2019) Specialty (STEM) (Nguyen et al., 2019) Specialty (SPED) (Nguyen et al., 2019) Specialty (other) (Nguyen et al., 2019) Experience (Nguyen et al., 2019) School Correlates: School Organizational Characteristics: School Size (Nguyen et al., 2019) Locale (Nguyen et al., 2019) Level (high, middle, or elem.) (Nguyen et al., 2019) Charter, private, traditional (Nguyen et al., 2019) Student discipline (Nguyen et al., 2019) Work environment (Nguyen et al., 2019) Administrative support (Nguyen et al., 2019) Teacher collaborations (Nguyen et al., 2019)	Burnout

Teacher leadership (Nguyen et al., 2019) Professional development (Nguyen et al., 2019) Induction/mentoring (Nguyen et al., 2019) Classroom Autonomy (Nguyen et al., 2019) School Resources: Class size (Nguyen et al., 2019) Classroom assistant (Nguyen et al., 2019) Teaching materials (Nguyen et al., 2019) Student Body Characteristics: (Nguyen et al., 2019) Student achievement (Nguyen et al., 2019) Ethnicity (Nguyen et al., 2019) Poverty (Nguyen et al., 2019) Percent IEP/LEP (Nguyen et al., 2019) Relational Demography: Race/gender congruence (Nguyen et al., 2019) External Correlates: Accountability: Teacher evaluation (Nguyen et al., 2019) Teacher effectiveness (Nguyen et al., 2019) Principal effectiveness (Nguyen et al., 2019) Merit Pay (Nguyen et al., 2019) Workforce: Employment rate (Nguyen et al., 2019) Late hiring (Nguyen et al., 2019) Retention bonus (Nguyen et al., 2019) Non-teacher salary (Nguyen et al., 2019) Salary (Nguyen et al., 2019) Union (Nguyen et al., 2019)	

Appendix D: Codebook

Theme	Sub Theme	Code	Files	References
Theme 1 Minimal or Lack of Experience with Restrictive Education Legislation				
	Sub Theme 1: Administrative Support Variability			
		Lack of Guidance or School Policy	24	57
		Generic Admin Support	6	7
		Specific Guidance	6	7
		District Admin Resist State Policies	2	2
	Sub Theme 2: Community Values Override Legislation			
		Trust in Teachers	17	40
		Religious or Family Values	6	8
		Lack of Parental Involvement or Interest	4	7
		Local Needs	3	3
	Sub Theme 3: Practical Education Concerns Outweigh Policy			
		Discussion, Knowledge, or Issue Around CRT, Race, or Gender, Absence of	18	35
		Meeting Students' Individual or Basic Needs	8	12
		SPED Concerns	4	5
		Addressing Typical Student Misbehavior	2	3
		School Report Card or Student Academic Performance Concerns	2	2
	Sub Theme 4: Professional Identity Preservation			
		Teach Historical Truth or Facts without Shame	14	27
		Teach Critical Thinking	6	14
		Teach Respect or Kindness	6	13
		Keeping Personal Political or Religious Views Out of the Classroom	6	9
		Avoid Political, Race, Gender, or Sex Related Topics	5	10

		Trust Personal Judgement	5	8
		Teach the Curriculum or Standards	5	6
		Resist Bias in Curriculum	4	7
		Teachers and Students Entitled to Personal Opinions	4	4
		Students Allowed to Study Race or Gender Topics	1	1
	Sub Theme 5: Political Views			
		Education, Over Politicization of	5	6
		Lack of Political Activism Knowledge	4	5
		Indifferent Towards CRT	4	4
		Political Awareness	3	3
		Teachers Accused of Pushing Agendas	3	3
		Uninterested in Liberal Issues	2	3
		Political Buzzword	2	2
	Sub Theme 6: Context			
		Subject Matter or Grade Level	11	13
		Rurality	8	13
		Demographics	7	9
Theme 2: Negative Experience with Restrictive Education Legislation				
	Sub Theme 1: Fear, Uncertainty, and Self-Censorship			
		Fear	8	21
		Self-Censorship or Increased Caution	8	13
		Uncertainty	4	6
	Sub Theme 2: Resistance			
		Perceived Purpose of HB1775	12	17
		Motivation & Methods of Resistance	5	16
		Diverse Student Population	1	2
		Must Ensure Student Safety	1	1
		Unspecific or Unrealistic Implementation	1	1
Theme 3: Positive Experience with Restrictive Education Legislation				
	Sub Theme 1: Agree with HB1775			

		Against CRT	2	5
		Protects Teachers	1	1
		Provides Helpful Guidance	1	1

Appendix E: IRB Approval Letter

The UNIVERSITY of OKLAHOMA

Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects

Approval of Initial Submission – Exempt from IRB Review – AP01

Date: January 10, 2025 **IRB#:** 18074

Principal Investigator: Jon Rand Lowry

Approval Date: 01/09/2025

Exempt Category: 2

Study Title: Restrictive Education Legislation: An Exploration of Discriminatory Censorship Laws

On behalf of the Institutional Review Board (IRB), I have reviewed the above-referenced research study and determined that it meets the criteria for exemption from IRB review. To view the documents approved for this submission, open this study from the *My Studies* option, go to *Submission History*, go to *Completed Submissions* tab and then click the *Details* icon.

As principal investigator of this research study, you are responsible to:

- Conduct the research study in a manner consistent with the requirements of the IRB and federal regulations 45 CFR 46.
- Request approval from the IRB prior to implementing any/all modifications as changes could affect the exempt status determination.
- Maintain accurate and complete study records for evaluation by the HRPP Quality Improvement Program and, if applicable, inspection by regulatory agencies and/or the study sponsor.
- Notify the IRB at the completion of the project.

If you have questions about this notification or using iRIS, contact the IRB @ 405-325-8110 or irb@ou.edu.

Cordially,

Lara Mayeux

Lara Mayeux, Ph.D.
Chair, Institutional Review Board

Appendix F
Proposed Timeline

1. Complete advanced inquiry course – Spring Semester 2024
2. Submit draft of prospectus to advisor – February 2024
3. Undertake revisions with advisor
4. Submit prospectus for review
7. Prospectus defense – April 30, 2024
8. Submit IRB – Fall 2024
9. Dissertation research and writing – Spring and Summer 2025
10. Submit dissertation draft to advisor – Fall 2025
11. Undertake revisions with advisor (estimated drafts may vary) – Fall 2025
12. Submit dissertation to committee (4-week review-time required) Fall 2025
13. Defend dissertation – October 2025
14. Address committee edits/revisions/comments
15. Upload final dissertation to SharePoint system – December 2025

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