Journeying Beyond: Critical Multiculturalism and the Narrative Engagements of White Rural Youth at Shady Grove High School

Dissertation

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Abstract

This dissertation is a study of “non-college bound” student’s perceptions of their educational experiences at one rural high school, as investigated through their narrative engagements, namely their class assignments, conversational interviews, and the creation of a digital story (Lambert, 2009). Using a theoretical framework of critical multiculturalism (May & Sleeter, 2010), and narrative inquiry as my methodology (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), I examine the student’s stories as meaningful contributions to current knowledge about issues in education such as the relevance of standardized curriculum, college access and readiness, and educational inequity.

Analyzing the narrative engagements of three students in particular - Greg, Claire and Alexa - revealed the complex and complicated ways in which students reflected on who they are, how they see themselves, and how they view their future aspirations. For all three of these students, their narratives relate to both their current day selves and their future selves and touch on the journeys that they must take to get to one from the other. For Greg, formal education is seen as irrelevant. For Claire, college is unnecessary, though training for her trade is essential and something she is planning to pursue. For Alexa, college and a 2-year medical licensure is her selected route to “become everything I ever wanted to be.”

Collectively, my analysis of data exposes the ways in which some students are not fully encouraged to pursue their driving passions (e.g., racecar driving, cosmetology) as
they participate in academic opportunities (e.g., preparing to attend college), and I conclude that educators—to include teachers, teacher educators, researchers and school administrators—should reflect on how meaning is assigned to activities (that get labeled as academic and/or social activities) by re-evaluating the goals and purposes of education for students like Greg, Claire, Alexa, and their peers.

In this work, these students shared their thoughts on what education is, isn’t, and might be, and asked to be understood within the process of their schooling. I suggest that it is time to re-envision what high school might be for non-college bound, rural, high school youth. Through student’s narratives and place-based pedagogies, which include the critical examination of the educational supports and limitations students perceive in their lives, perhaps high schools can better serve this population so that future students when asked will say: high school is useful, engaging, for me, and pushes me to become who I want be.

*Keywords*: rural youth, adolescents, high school, narrative inquiry, digital storytelling, critical multiculturalism
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Vita

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Chapter 1: Stories of Somewhere—An Introduction and Theoretical Framing

Introduction

Often when telling stories, the narrator starts with a location in order to provide the listener with a context. If the story is about a trip, an adventure, or even about a car break down, and if there is a desire to build drama in a situation, sometimes the place is unspecified, such as “so, I was in the middle of nowhere…” This generic phrase, “the middle of nowhere,” covers a gamut of spaces and places, and in both my life and my work, I have found these words rolling through my mind and out of my mouth. I have also found, on this tiny planet, that nowhere is always somewhere and usually that place is the home and/or community of something or someone. One person’s “nowhere” is the center of another person’s universe.

The media—from the evening news to popular culture—tends to position rural communities as “nowhere,” “nothing,” and as a place to leave rather than as a place to be (Schafft & Jackson, 2010). In the pages of this dissertation study, I highlight some of the ways rural communities are negatively framed in the media and in educational literature. Doing so allows me to draw attention to some contemporary risks that threaten the survival of rural communities across the United States because of socioeconomic, political, and educational factors, particularly as these factors limit the opportunities afforded to young people. Furthermore, I discuss the systemic nudging provided by well-
meaning rural educators that tends to push students to make their lives somewhere else (outside rural communities), with the end result being the outmigration of young people from their rural, familial contexts (Carr & Kefalas, 2009; Corbett, 2013a; Crockett, Shanahan, & Jackson-Newsome, 2000; Gibson & Argent, 2008). Central to this dissertation study is the idea that everywhere is in fact somewhere; thus, as adults (teachers, school administrators, community leaders, etc.) support young people’s movement toward active, engaged citizenship, it is necessary for them to understand the ways that individuals are tied both to the people in their lives and the places from which they come. They (as we all) should also understand that public education, in conjunction with place-based pedagogies, can positively serve the educational needs and support the future aspirations of rural youth.

In order to reimagine positive and critical understandings of “nowhere,” I begin this chapter by calling attention to the fact that this dissertation study is about stories of somewhere and stories of youth aspirations in someplace. These stories, or narrative engagements as I come to call them, are from rural youth and reflect their experiences growing up in a rural school district, which I name Shady Grove. These rural youth are high school seniors who, according to school tracking/categories, are not college bound students. The stories they share, about life in a contemporary rural high school, focus on the supports and hindrances that they believe impact their schooling experiences and future aspirations.
Someplace.

I recall well the first day I visited Shady Grove High School. The surrounding landscape of green and yellow fields unrolled beneath the blue sky to shimmer with welcome warmth as I drove the 45 miles to Shady Grove (the high school derives its name from the name of the district). It was a bucolic Midwest American scene to be sure, one which I would continue to enjoy through the Fall of that year; a stereotypical landscape that has been written about, drawn, painted, and photographed in all its varieties, but that tells little about the people who call the community home.

I arrived early for my meeting with the principal, and watched the students leaving for the day. I noticed the place lacked a certain frenzy I had witnessed at other schools. There was a gentle spilling of students into the areas surrounding the school, as if a faucet had been turned on and the contents of the building were overflowing into the parking lot. At Shady Grove High School, young people ebbed outside and they lingered. The parking lot emptied slowly and vehicles gradually dribbled out onto the roads adjacent to the school property. One by one, the cars headed over the hills, out of sight.

This scene is an important one for me to recall, particularly as I sought to conduct my dissertation study at Shady Grove High School, a school of over 600 teenagers. At this school, I came to collect the narrative engagements (e.g., digital stories, obstacle papers, data from conversational interviews) of 25 students who described to me aspects of their lives, their schooling experiences, and their hopes and dreams for their futures. In this way, I would be remiss if I did not say that this dissertation study was conducted at a time when many of the seniors at Shady Grove were going through a transition—from the safe space of their high school to life in the outside world. Suddenly, they were high
school seniors preparing for graduation—an event which was approaching all too slowly for some and at a rapid pace for others. The teachers at Shady Grove High School were ready to deliver the seniors into the next phase in life, futures that may well be, as one student told me, “amazing” or just “another day” (transcript, Kelly).

For many of these students, the walls of Shady Grove Elementary School, then Shady Grove Middle School, and then Shady Grove High School—each within one square mile of each other—had been an arm’s reach away as they grew into the young adults featured in this dissertation study. As I will explain in Chapter 4, there were no definite plans for some of these students, even after receiving their high school diploma. For all of these students, there was hope that tomorrow would be filled with success and with dreams both imagined and fulfilled. Their stories reveal a process of looking forward and looking back, as students grapple with who they are and who they want to be.

As a researcher who is also a storyteller, selecting the beginning is always difficult. For it is only the storyteller’s framework that puts order to disorder (Charon, 2006) and that connects the seemingly unconnected (Zander & Zander, 2000). This dissertation study of youth stories encapsulates issues of education, place, and identity. In so doing, the stories reflect individual experiences in one rural high school that are important to highlight because, like threads in a quilt, these narratives are a part of the whole. They reveal the feelings and narratives of students who live and attend school in a rural context. Additionally, these stories are fragments of knowledge that reveal the experiences of those who are educated in today’s rural schools.
So, where to start? Was it the moment that students began the project of writing, then telling, then creating their digital stories in late October 2012? Or was it in August 2012, with my arrival at Shady Grove High School at the start of a new school year? Of course, the students’ narratives began long before I embarked on this dissertation study of storytelling, so, as suggested by Native American storyteller Thomas King (2003), I’ve selected as my beginning point; “you’ll never believe what happened” because it “is always a great way to start” (p.1).

You’ll never believe what happened. At Shady Grove High School, in a class called *Journey Beyond Shady Grove*, 25 students labeled non-college bound attended one of two classes and openly, critically, and sophisticatedly talked about life in high school based on their own experiences and desires for their futures. What happened as a result of the *Journey Beyond Shady Grove* class (see Chapter 4) helped me to understand the import of youth stories insofar as educational research, classroom pedagogy, and the schooling experiences of young people are concerned.

**The research questions.**

In this dissertation study, the narratives Shady Grove High School students create and share about schooling are examined in light of both their community context and future aspirations. This dissertation study addresses the following research questions:

- How do white, rural, non-college bound, students - at Shady Grove High School - interrogate their educational experiences through specific
narrative engagements (digital storytelling, conversational interviews, obstacle papers)?

• As these students interrogate their experiences, how do they perceive facets of the education system to support or hinder their future aspirations?

• As these students consider their future aspirations, what do their educational experiences and narrative engagements reveal about systemic inequities within Shady Grove High School (and therefore perhaps other predominately white, rural high schools)?

Getting to Shady Grove.

This work grew from my personal concerns about youth, particularly marginalized youth, which were inspired by experiences I had as a researcher and formally a speech-language pathologist in public schools in the Midwestern region of the United States. I embarked on this work with an underlying belief that a “substantive and sustained engagement with critical theory can result in the development of frameworks and practices that lead to empowering outcomes for youth in the world today” (Morrell, 2008, p. xii). In this dissertation study, students’ perceptions of their educational experiences are investigated through their classwork, interviews, the creation of digital narratives, and other shared stories.

Theoretically, I understand and come to critique these perceptions through the framework of critical multiculturalism, and methodologically, I analyze these perceptions
by turning to narrative inquiry (see Chapter 3). Both a critical multicultural theoretical framework and a narrative inquiry methodological orientation allow me to investigate the ways in which humans are storying and storied beings who make, interpret, and reinterpret meaning through the stories they tell and retell (Clough, 2002; Maynes, Pierce, & Laslett, 2008). The stories, or narrative engagements, presented in this dissertation study are contextually and historically situated stories of education as told by the youth who experienced them. They are products of a specific time, place, and perspective and shed light on what it means to be a high school student graduating from a particular rural high school in the United States Midwest in the year 2013. They also shed light on the presence of educational inequity and oppression, which are major concerns for critical scholars (e.g. Delpit, 1995; Kinloch, 2012; May & Sleeter, 2010; Noddings, 2005).

In this dissertation study, there is an underlying assumption that young people are creators and storytellers (they are, potentially, critical inquirers), and that their stories of education can serve as meaningful contributions to current knowledge about issues in education such as the relevance of standardized curriculum, college access and readiness, and educational inequity (concerns debated by critical multiculturalists). Recognizing that individual stories may reflect larger narratives about education, this work attempts to contribute insights to what is known about critical multiculturalism—as a way of theorizing difference, power, and (in)justice—and, simultaneously, determine ways to connect what we know about critical multiculturalism (Fine & Weis, 2003; May & Sleeter, 2010) to what we know about narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Maynes, Pierce, & Laslett, 2008).
In the remainder of this chapter I discuss critical multiculturalism as the theoretical framework I am using in this dissertation study. Then in chapter 2, I present literature on rural education before I turn to a discussion of the methodological approach and the methods used in this study in chapter 3. Doing these things supports my analysis and discussion of data (the narrative engagements) of focal students from Shady Grove High School (chapter 4) and my discussion of the implications that result from this study, as the implications serve as commentary on youth narrative engagements, schooling, and systemic inequality in one rural public school (Chapter 5). As a result of this dissertation study, I am left to believe that adults must support students by helping them to imagine a variety of possibilities for their futures. We must be committed to understanding who students are and what they desire. As we do these things, we must provide quality educational opportunities that encourage them to see themselves as active agents in their schools and rural communities.

**Once upon a time.**

If there is a large seamless narrative that all our stories are a part of, then this dissertation study is a meta-story. This is a study of student stories, viewed in light of the much larger narrative about education and equity in one rural public school in the United States. Thus I invite you, readers, into this story of stories, so let us journey forth with my discussion of critical multiculturalism as the selected theoretical framework.
Theoretical Framing

The remainder of this chapter, as well as the chapter which follows, situates the study in a broader social context. By describing critical multiculturalism as my theoretical framework up front, I stipulate how tenets of critical multiculturalism serve as a foundation for this dissertation study. I also justify why teachers and scholars interested in white students in rural schools should consider critical multiculturalism as an appropriate theoretical frame of reference.

As a way to discuss critical multiculturalism, I first briefly summarize critical pedagogy and issues in multicultural education. I do this in order to elucidate critical multiculturalism, which relies on specific components of critical pedagogy and multicultural education. Then, I articulate the theoretical framing of critical multiculturalism by delving into scholars who align their work with critical multiculturalism—scholars who influence and impact my thinking on issues of equity, oppression, justice, and pedagogy. Next, I highlight the necessity of research that involves the voices of rural youth and other marginalized young people, for if we are serious about the education of all students in American public schools, then, as Nieto (1994) writes, “one way to begin the process of changing school policies and practices is to listen to students’ views about them” (p. 396).

Critical pedagogy.

Paulo Freire is oft considered the father of critical scholarship in education with his seminal work *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (Freire, 1970/2000), a text that positions
democratic education as necessary for democratic society and promotes education as the active examination of lived experiences, local power structures, and oppression. Such an examination necessarily agitates for and seeks to create change based on existing forms of social injustice. Freire’s ideas, as articulated in a number of his texts, oppose education that is viewed as a form of banking whereby teachers deposit information into their students for withdrawal at a later time (usually in a test taking scenario). In this kind of education, the selection and delivery of information typically upholds societal power imbalances, ensuring those with less power (particularly poor, working class, minorities, and other marginalized populations) remain disenfranchised. Change occurs when those who are being oppressed recognize the structures at work that attempt to keep them at a disadvantage and are able to gain a level of critical consciousness in order to work toward and insist on social, political, and/or educational changes.


Either functions as an instrument that is used to facilitate the integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity to it or it becomes ‘the practice of freedom,’ the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world (p. 34).

That is, education can be a reduplicative mechanism that delivers and implements that which has always been done, or it can be an experience, which provides opportunity and
allowance for teachers and their students to consider, critique and question the information they are learning and the manner which they are learning it.

The latter is the essence of critical pedagogy, which strives for transformation, change and social justice through this type of education process. McLaren (1995) states:

Critical pedagogy needs to hold a nonreductionist view of the social order; that is, society needs to be seen as an irreducible indeterminancy. The social field is always open, and we must explore its fissures, fault-lines, gaps and silences. Power relations may not always have conscious design, but they have unintended consequences which define deep structural aspects of oppression (p. 53).

McLaren (1995) goes on to say that, “while domination has a logic without design in its signs and systems and social practices, it does operate through overdetermined structures of race, class, and gender difference” (p. 54). In other words, Freire envisions education as a practice of freedom, where young people are taught to critically observe, assess and reflect on the world they live in. By examining their experiences, and the “fissures, fault-lines, gaps and silences” (McLaren, 1995, p. 53) they notice in their lives, education becomes a meaningful and relevant endeavor. Through the exploration of justice and injustice as witnessed in their communities (e.g. Kinloch, 2010), they develop the critical skills necessary to become directors - rather than simply actors - in their journeys as students, and citizens. Thus avoiding the role of the chorus in a plot that serves to maintain the current social order and capitalist leanings of the contemporary education system (May & Sleeter, 2010; McLaren, 2005).

As Sleeter and McLaren (1995) note, “critical pedagogy and multicultural education are complementary approaches that enable a sustained criticism of the effects
of global capitalism and its implications in the production of race and gender injustices in schools and other institutionalized settings (p.8).” Though critical pedagogy and multicultural education grew from different struggles for freedom – the former in Latin America, the latter born from the United States Civil Rights movement – they are “mutually informing frameworks” (Sleeter & McLaren, 1995, p.11). In the following section I explicate a brief history of multicultural education.

**Multicultural education.**

The area of multicultural education grew out of issues surrounding race relations and the unequal representation of students from diverse backgrounds in curricular content. W.E.B. DuBois (1903) and Carter G. Woodson (1933) were some of the earliest multicultural scholars who wrote about the rights of African Americans and highlighted how education for African Americans was (and arguably still is) a form of subordination, a way to control and restrict opportunity, and a “colonization of the mind” (see also Fanon, 1967; Thiongo, 1986). Born out of the Civil Rights movement (Banks, 2004), the earliest rendition of multicultural education was known as ethnic studies, and sought to develop teaching materials based on African American content and history, insisting on the consideration and presence of varied (non white) view points in educational texts.

Scholars in multicultural education (such as Banks & Banks, 2004; Howard, 2010; Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Nieto, 2010) pursue an agenda of equity in

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¹ For a comprehensive review of multicultural education’s history see Banks, 2004.
education, calling for a system that respects and responds to difference to better serve the needs of students, particularly students of color. The emphasis in multicultural education is the consideration for, recognition of, and respect for students and teachers of varying backgrounds, lived experiences, and racial and ethnic identities, in ways that secure the academic success of students in schools and, consequently, in the larger world (Banks & Banks, 2004). As Sleeter and McLaren (1995) write, “multicultural education frames inequality in terms of institutionalized oppression and reconfigures the families and communities of oppressed groups as sources of strengths” (p.12). Let me reiterate the second part of that quote, “reconfigures the families and communities of oppressed groups as sources of strengths” (p. 12), rather than a problem to be fixed as is present in much of the discourse around education for marginalized populations.

At the heart of the work of multicultural education is pluralism: multiculturalism, multiple perspectives, and multiple voices as important components of the work. Multicultural education places justice, equity, and cultural democracy as fundamental tenets (Banks & Banks, 2004, p. xi), and it is premised on the belief that culture, which is multifaceted, complex, changing, and never neutral, is a major contributing factor in issues of schooling (Gay, 2010; Howard, 2010; Lee, 2007). As Howard (2010) notes, the perennial underachievement of culturally diverse and low income students is an ongoing concern for educators at all levels. A myriad of factors contribute to the widespread disparities in achievement between these groups of students and their counterparts. However, there are certain areas that remain largely undertheorized and frequently overlooked in analyses of students’ school
performance – namely the importance of race and culture in schooling experiences of today’s youth (p. 1).

To clarify terminology, multicultural education has a focus on equity, rather than equality in education. *Equality in education* means that everyone gets the same thing, that opportunities are equal, that educational curricula, resources, by all intents and purposes, educational experiences are similar if not the same. This has been an illusory concept in American schools, dispelled by the work of authors like Jonathan Kozol (1991, 2005) who writes “that the nation, for all practice and intent, has turned its back on the moral implications, if not yet the legal ramifications of the *Brown* [*Brown vs. the Board of Education*] decision” (Kozol, 1991, p.4). He goes on to say, “in many cities, what is termed “restructuring” struck me as very little more than moving around the same old furniture in the house of poverty” (p.5) where, “the perceived objective was a more ‘efficient’ ghetto school or one with greater ‘input’ from ghetto parents, or more ‘choices’ for ghetto children. The fact of ghetto education as a permanent American reality appeared to be accepted” (p. 5).

While equality - via an equal distribution of resources (e.g. equal school funding, teachers equally qualified etc.) - would be a magical thing, *equity in education* strives not for the grandiose and often unattainable promise of equality, but for fairness and inclusion in all aspects of education. In other words, adaptations, changes, and accommodations are fully supported in order to even the playing field and ensure systemically disadvantaged young people are able to compete for the same opportunities as their more economically advantaged, or privileged, counterparts (e.g. affirmative
action policies, bilingual education programs). The intent of multicultural education is one of equity, which is seen in Banks’ (2010) definitions of multicultural education as:

An idea, an educational reform movement, and a process whose major goal is to change the structure of educational institutions so that male and female students, exceptional students, and students who are members of diverse racial, ethnic, language, and cultural groups will have an equal chance to achieve academically in school (p. 1).

Banks and Banks (1995) define multicultural equity pedagogy as “teaching strategies and classroom environments that help students from diverse racial, ethnic, and cultural groups attain the knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed to function effectively within, and help create and perpetuate a just, human, and democratic society,” (p. 152) with the goal of “helping students become reflective and active citizens of a democratic society” (Banks & Banks, 1995, p. 152).

Although most of the emphasis has been on race and racism, multicultural education also focuses on the experiences of linguistically and ethnically marginalized populations, women, the LGBTQ movement, and people with disabilities and/or special rights (Sleeter & Grant, 1987). Sleeter (1996), for example, posits that her work in multicultural education grew from the boundaries she experienced as a female: “This feeling of marginalization was persistent and very painful” (p.18). This very “feeling of marginalization” arises for many reasons, including reasons associated with gender, race, disability, class, and religion—these all serve as possible variables that can influence an individual’s interactions with/in the world (Banks & Banks, 2010; Gay, 2010).
Further, Ladson-Billings (2004) asserts that multicultural education “is a composite. It is no longer solely race, or class, or gender. Rather, it is the infinite permutations that come about as a result of the dazzling array of combinations human beings recruit to organize and fulfill themselves” (p. 50). In other words, individuals possess complex identities (Raible & Nieto, 2008) that come to affect various people in various ways. In terms of schooling, educators need to be ever so mindful and respectful of the heterogeneity in classrooms across the United States. The primary goal of multicultural education, then, is not simply about teaching children from different cultural backgrounds (Sleeter, 1992) or helping people to ‘get along’ or affirming language and culture or making students feel good (Nieto, 2010). Rather, the primary goal is to implement a model of education that accommodates the various skill sets, talents, and knowledge that learners bring with them into classrooms (Lee, 2007). Doing so means that educators openly provide students, particularly poor students and students of color, with ample opportunities to learn, to recognize themselves as scholars (Howley, 2009; Kinloch, 2012), to acknowledge their agency (Lee, 2007), to attain academic achievement (Howard, 2010), and to question inequitable, oppressive educational structures (Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1995) that do nothing more than keep the playing field uneven.

Multicultural education and its promise of “recognizing, respecting, and including cultural differences as a basis for teaching and learning” (May & Sleeter, 2010, p.1) has not only been a failed promise of an earlier era (May, 1999), but a promise which has actively been in retraction in the United States in recent years (May & Sleeter, 2010). This is the case, claims McLaren (1995), partly because multicultural education in its
most common form—liberal multiculturalism—is founded on the untenable principal that equality exists between, across, and among all groups, yet “social and educational opportunities do not exist that permit everyone to compete equally in the capitalist marketplace” (p. 40). As May (1999) notes, liberal multiculturalism over emphasizes the possible impact inclusive curriculum can make in student’s lives, while ignoring “the impact of structural racism on students’ lives” (p.6).

Multicultural education scholarship has also been critiqued for the “inability to link effectively theory, policy and practice” (May, 1999, p.5), and the pervasive interpretation that multicultural education is something we “do” (Nieto, 2010). More specifically, multicultural education is still viewed incorrectly, or is misappropriated, by many schools and teachers as an additive—take, for instance, the belief that African American history should be studied in the month of February, or a Kwanza project should only be assigned during the December holidays. Indeed, schools still participate in international days where students wear costumes and bring in foods that reflect aspects of their ‘culture.’

In these ways, multicultural education has been distilled down to “a frill” (Nieto, 2010), with talks and workshops about ‘getting along’ and/or a holidays and heroes approach to culturally inclusive education (Banks & Banks, 2010). These simplistic approaches to multicultural education serve as a superficial panacea for the deeper issues of inequality related to race, class, gender, and ability that multicultural education was intended to address (Banks, 2004). Situating multicultural education and its original intentions inside mainstream discourse practices has proved somewhat elusive (Sleeter,
1992). It is May (1999) who claims, “multicultural education has had a largely negligible impact to date on the life chances of minority students” (p. 1).

**Critical multiculturalism.**

Critical multiculturalism grew out of concerns regarding the inefficient and malignant effects of liberal multiculturalism in education (May & Sleeter, 2010). Liberal multiculturalism is the seemingly benevolent practices and policies that guide educators to recognize and respect differences and diversities in classrooms. May and Sleeter (2010) posit that most contemporary multicultural education programs appear to take the ineffectual stance of liberal multiculturalism, a popularly held position in teacher training institutions (McShay, 2010) and a position which often burdens those with the least power to take responsibility for any friction in the classroom. Such a position fails to address the systemic inequality that creates the friction in the first place (May & Sleeter, 2010). Frustratingly, liberal multiculturalism is fatuous in effecting change in classrooms and schools, for it is based on assumptions of meritocracy, and does not interrogate the systems which render students in static socio-economic positions, with schools consolidating and reduplicating the status quo. Grant and Sleeter (1996) note that “schools do actively participate in the reproduction of social inequality, and also this process is created on a day-to-day basis by human actors making sense of the world around them” (p. 7).

While “education can not compensate for society” (May, 1999, p. 8) a weakness of much theorizing about both critical pedagogy and multicultural education has been the failure to practically address the problems of the larger structures that impact students
and teachers (May, 1999; Oakes, 1985). This is described as structural inequality, which might include “racism, institutionalized poverty, and discrimination” (May & Sleeter, 2010, p.3). Critical multiculturalism takes tenets from critical pedagogy (McLaren & Kincheloe, 2007; Morrell, 2008) combined with the intents of multicultural education (Sleeter & McLaren, 1995) to move to a place that promotes an interrogation of the structures and situations that create inequality, in small and large ways, while advocating for social, political, and educational change, justice, and equity (May & Sleeter, 2010).

In other words, critical multiculturalism puts a greater focus on issues related to power and systems that create and perpetuate unequal and unjust situations for specific segments of the population (e.g., poor and working class students, students of color, women, LGBT youth, etc.). Though, there are multiple issues at play (e.g. student scheduling, tracking, grouping practices, labeling, social climate, staff expectations for student achievement, the arrangement of physical structures, standardized testing, and/or the (mis)distribution of public education dollars) when considering inequity in schools, this section will focus on critical multicultural pedagogy and the ways critical scholarship has taken up critical multiculturalism in school based practice.

As noted, the theory of critical multiculturalism emphasizes the significance of locating race, class, identity, diversity, and difference within curricula (within processes of teaching and learning), while simultaneously critiquing and challenging that curriculum as a component of the systemic structures that serve different populations in

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2 See Banks, 2004
different ways (oppressing some, while supporting others). In doing so, critical multiculturalism focuses on who students are (their identities, positioning as learners, their lived conditions and backgrounds) in its argument that these things should be centered in students’ educational experiences in familial, multiple, and critical ways (Kinloch, 2011). In fact, this centering of who students are, as argued by critical multiculturalists (Fine & Weis, 2003; Grant & Sleeter, 1996) can provide students with rich opportunities to connect academic content to their growing understanding about the historical, cultural, and literary contributions of diverse groups of people (thus, the idea that monolithic and monolingual values dominate teaching and learning are both challenged and resisted).

By considering the systematic processes that reproduce inequality and school failure (Sleeter, 1992) critical multiculturalism provides a way to think about and address underperforming students in contemporary classrooms. As Grant and Sleeter (1996) note:

Schooling itself is not equal in quality, and students themselves sometimes recognize and resist this. However, students also perceive and think about opportunities for themselves in the wider society, based on experiences in their own community. Sometimes they shape their behavior in ways that maximize success, often they do not, and often they redefine success to fit the opportunities and roles they believe are open to them (p.7).

For example, for non-college bound students, or students who have limited access to certain education opportunities, who do not have the opportunity for exploring the ways they are feeling and the frustrations they are experiencing (Darder, 2010), may begin to internalize the sense of “failure.” Or, they may change their aspirations to those that make
them acceptable dreams within the limitations of the system. Nygreen (2013) addressed this very issue in her work with high school students who have been identified as “delinquent, or a problem” (p. 2).

Nygreen’s (2013) participatory action research revolved around a critique of the typically accepted adage in educational discourse about “getting ahead” in school, which is often cast encouragingly on communities where school failure is rife. Nygreen (2013) reflects that this notion “requires getting ahead of others, and the most successful students are those who get ahead of the greatest number of others” (p. 3), which sets up a hierarchy where some must, by necessity, fall behind. As Nygreen (2013) points out, these concepts – getting ahead and falling behind - are two sides to the same coin. Nygreen (2013) further states that “the emphasis on getting ahead in school undermines possibilities for meaningful learning and democratic education” (p.4), instead “we must reclaim as a core value the belief that every person, no matter what she or he did in school, is entitled to dignified work, a livable wage, and a political voice” (p.177). Nygreen’s (2013) work with high schoolers helps educators better comprehend some of the issues students face as they navigate both their schooling experiences and their home lives.

Because of its derivation from a tradition of critical scholarship, critical multiculturalism provides a platform on which to help students and educators examine, critique, and even resist prevailing racist, classist, and systemic social and educational
issues. For example, Bartolome’s (2010) work considers the ways educator bias can limit certain students. Considering the role of teachers, Bartolome (2010) reflects that educators\(^3\) have a “tendency to normalize and naturalize potentially discriminatory ideologies and render them “invisible” to the detriment of … students” (p. 48). Yet, Bartolome (2010) posits that teachers:

> Have a moral obligation to acquire the necessary critical skills that will enable them to deconstruct these ideologies for what they are – classist and white supremacist orientations that they may sometimes unknowingly hold about low-SES [socio-economic status] immigrant and other subordinated students. These negative perceptions left unproblematized, will likely manifest themselves as discriminatory practices in classrooms (p.48).

Critical multiculturalism thus provides a way to view how teaching and pedagogy can nurture students’ acquisition of the tools necessary for their aspirations, particularly those students who are not succeeding based on the biased, one-sided standards (e.g., Dominant Academic English; monocultural and monolingual norms) that govern the current education system (Lee, 2007; May & Sleeter, 2010; Delpit, 1995). Lee’s (2007) work with students focuses on “leveraging everyday knowledge” (p. 34) as a basis for the creation of cultural data sets, which are used as curricular content to ensure high standards of academic achievement. Lee’s teaching meets students on familiar territory,

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\(^3\) Bartolome’s writings here focus on the training of English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers, but relates to teachers and teacher training in general.
building skills in that content area, before making the links with content which might be more academically strenuous or simply in line with the content standards and testing requirements. Lee notes that the power structures are often reversed in the development of these cultural data sets, as students might select and analyze material that the teacher is less familiar with (e.g. contemporary song lyrics). If the purpose is literary reasoning, Lee argues, the materials teachers and students use to get there are irrelevant.

Relatedly, Ladson-Billings’ (2009) *The Dream Keepers* presents the work of eight reputable teachers of African American students, describing the methods they used to promote their students’ success. Each of these teachers “strongly identified with the profession and felt it important to embrace the children in their classrooms as learners” (p. x). Using “deliberate pedagogical strategy” each of these teachers actively “worked to create a community of learners” with an emphasis on “collective responsibility and collective rewards.” Finally, “for these teachers knowledge was flexible and contestable” (p. x). That is, they themselves modeled and engaged in the scrutiny of text and the verification of facts and they expected and supported their students to do the same. As Noddings (2005), states “there are few things that all students need to know, and it ought to be acceptable for students to reject some material in order to pursue other topics with enthusiasm” (p. 19). Ladson-Billings’ (2009) interviews and observation data reveal the ways teachers help students conceptualize themselves and others, form social relations, and conceptualize knowledge, and like Lee (2007), Ladson-Billings (2009) concludes that when “students are treated as competent, they are likely to demonstrate competence” (p. 134).
This type of inquiry—one which connects local experience to larger societal themes—is present in Kinloch’s (2010) work with young people around the topic of gentrification in New York City’s Harlem community, an issue that is met with a sense of urgency for Kinloch’s students, Phillip and Khaleeq. They live and attend school in Harlem, an area that has been experiencing rising housing costs that has forced neighborhood families to relocate to other communities. This forceful movement out of Harlem impacts important social, historical and cultural traditions. Kinloch’s work, which relies on scholarship in critical multiculturalism and critical pedagogy, demonstrates how those marginalized by place, race, and/or socioeconomics can assert agency and identify themselves as critical thinkers, learners, and doers who are able to access the content necessary for the futures they themselves envision (see also Delpit, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1995a, 1995b, 2009; May & Sleeter, 2010; Nieto, 2010). This is a major point of critical multiculturalism—that people should be empowered to critique inequitable structures and systems that impact them and others. In moving toward the definition of critical multiculturalism, McLaren (1995) argues that this work must have a “transformative political agenda” that considers and challenges the social order; it must engage in what hooks (1994) refers to as “naming” (p. 62) that which needs to be changed. Here I have attempted to relay that critical multicultural scholars are concerned

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Arguably the difference between Lee (2007), Ladson-Billings (2009) and Kinloch (2010)’s work is in the lack of or presence of an explicit “transformatory political agenda”. The former probably are more closely aligned with multicultural educators in the way they position their research, whereas Kinloch(2010, 2012) explicitly agitates for change and transformatory pedagogy in her “pedagogies of possibility.”
about transforming institutional, social, economic, and cultural structures that perpetuate inequity and oppression, and one way they argue for the uptake of this transformation is through implementation of multicultural curricula inside public schools.

Critical multiculturalism also calls for an examination into whiteness and white privilege (McIntosh, 1989). Bell (2010) remarks that “whites as a group tend to be less conscious of racism and/or more likely to believe that racism has been addressed than people of color who experience the ongoing effects of racism in their daily lives” (p. 14). For white students, the societal benefits conferred to them due to their skin color are not often interrogated in classroom settings (Tatum, 1997). The ways in which whiteness is cast as ‘normative’ is subtle yet pervasive (Bell, 2010) particularly in the framing of education matters, including much education research. Yet, white male experiences and white middle class norms must be problematized and examined, rather than reified as “typical,” to make visible all other cultures, races, and ways of being (Bell, 2010; Sleeter, 1996). Critical multiculturalists insist on the explicit viewing of whiteness as an ethnicity that is socially constructed. In this way, multicultural curricula decenters whiteness and emphasizes differences and diversities.

Further, the idea that language and its symbolic forms of representation derived from the normalization of white experience can negatively impact people—particularly people who have not fared well educationally, politically, socially, and economically in the United States—should be explicated, for it is evident in current educational discourse. Graue (1993) for example, writes about the linguistic power and meanings of “school readiness,” a phrase that emerged and took hold, with an underlying conception that white, middle class parenting and communication styles were typical, ideal, and
standard of all families and all people, and thus set the expectation for the skill set children would possess when they are “ready” to start school. This widely accepted norm—one that both privileges and essentializes white, middle class parenting and communication—devalues the practices in households of families with differing language and literacy mores. (see Delpit & Dowdy, 2008; Graue, 1993; Heath, 1983; Philips, 1992; Kummen, 2011).

Another example of how language and symbolic representation are used in ways that oppress and marginalize people is the discourse that casts “rural” as a problem, which dates back to Roosevelt’s presidency in the early 1900’s as well as British debates surrounding urban versus rural interests in the industrial revolution era (Theobold & Wood, 2010). Both of these examples point to McLaren’s concern that language has historically been used in strategic, systematic ways that privilege white, middle class norms at the expense of other linguistic and cultural ways of being. The need to critique restrictive, classist, and racist educational practices, pedagogies, processes, and policies that operate in public school environments—from the language that is used, the mandates that are issued, to the tendencies that privilege certain ways of being over others—is ever so important.

The definition that McLaren (1995) proposes for critical multiculturalism also “interrogates the construction of identity and difference in relation to politics,” (p. 43) suggesting identity is fluid and is directly connected to the meaning making systems that are created by broader social influences (e.g. identification with/against membership in social groups, familial connections, community, religion, country, in addition to national events, media, and political discourse to name but a few). McLaren’s point relates to the
idea that people are actively making meaning and seeking to understand themselves in relation to that which they experience and that which is circulating in the larger world.

Through the described scholarship, I have attempted to provide examples of ways critical multiculturalism has been taken up and enacted in schools and classrooms. In addition, it should be noted that:

1. Centering students in culturally relevant pedagogies is not enough. Critical multicultural scholars also agitate for an equitable distribution of power and wealth (E.g. Kozol, Nygreen) in and between schools and communities.
2. Critical multiculturalism implores that we respect differences and diversities in multiracial, multiethnic societies, and not essentialize them.
3. The struggles for educational rights should not be limited to segments of the population, but for all.
4. Critical multiculturalism requires an interrogation into exclusionary practices and ideas of homogeneity, monolithic, monolingual, and institutional structures.

In my discussion of the literature on rural education (Chapter Two), I describe place-based pedagogies, which tessellates with critical multiculturalism in that they call for education specific to place and population, in the same way that critical multiculturalism calls for a deeper look at the practices and processes being experienced in students’ specific classroom communities.

**Justifying critical multiculturalism as a theoretical frame.**

This dissertation study strives to provide insights into students’ perspectives on, and engagements in, their own educational processes. To do this, it considers the ways
students’ identities and sense of agency are shaped in light of the structures that support and/or hinder their success. Additionally, this dissertation study takes up the stories, or narrative engagements, of students in order to weave their experiences into a larger discourse about education, opportunity, and access. The work is premised on the understanding that students’ stories can be capitalized on as a way to increase their involvement in schooling, and, according to Gay (2010), this is important because schools have a responsibility to prepare, view, and understand students as intellectual beings.

Having introduced critical multiculturalism as my primary, overarching theoretical framework for this dissertation study, I believe it is important to explicitly state the justifications for my decision to identify as a critical multiculturalist who collects and analyzes youth narrative engagements. I rely on critical multiculturalism as I work with white, rural students because:

1. There is an urgent need to include more student voices and narratives in the literature on education in ways that support the documentation of students’ experiences and perspectives as consumers of education (Kinloch, 2010, 2011; Morrell, 2008; Nieto, 1994). In so many ways, rural students are marginalized in the dialogue about public school students in the United States, and their perspectives are rarely present in the literature. Critical multiculturalism provides a platform for considering their points of view and honoring their positions as learners and human beings in schools and in the larger world.

2. There is an ongoing need for scholarship that connects theory and practice (e.g. Gay, 2010; hooks, 1994). This dissertation study provides a chance to consider
how student stories offer opportunities for teachers to engage in democratic pedagogies (Freire, 1970/2000; Kinloch 2012) by critiquing and challenging normative and restrictive expectations, beliefs, and values imposed upon white, rural students who classify as poor and working class.

3. The scholarship on critical multiculturalism (May & Sleeter, 2010) provides examples and theoretical support for additional studies to consider how students access opportunities, confront roadblocks, and name educational inequities within their school in ways that encourage them to both determine and question their own goals and future aspirations.

Ultimately, this dissertation study was designed to “help students make sense of and impose meaning on their pursuit of academic tasks” (Lee, p. 27) for “the main point of education (in the context of a lived life) is to enable a human being to become increasingly mindful with regard to his or her lived situation and its untapped possibilities” (Greene, 1995, p. 182). According to Giroux (2004), “the greatest threat to our children… comes from a society that refuses to view children as a social investment” and that relegates “children to live in poverty” with limited opportunities for critical learning experiences (p. 45). As educators and researchers, taking a critical multicultural perspective allows us to critique the current status quo (e.g., white, middle class values; a prevailing discourse of whiteness; Dominant Academic English) as we recognize and highlight the “multiple excellences” (Greene, 1995, p. 179) students possess.

Simultaneously, we must acknowledge how students—and in this case, poor and working class white students—can be “moved to reach towards the possible” (Greene,
Critical multiculturalism, then, views education as multidimensional, empowering, transformative, emancipatory (Gay, 2010), and “as a practice of freedom” (Freire, 2009, p. 57). If our research and teaching practices are interwoven and designed around students, then our teaching and learning should reflect how people grow, learn, and change in sociocultural spaces that support critical thinking, diversity, difference, innovative literacy and narrative engagements, and, as Kinloch (2010) names it, “pedagogies of possibility” (p.192).

It is in the thoughtful and critical application of critical multiculturalism in relation to teaching and learning that we find the seeds for transformation, awakening, and awareness, where students are supported to recognize their own capacities and possibilities, and where the structures that work against them (and us) are not just recognized, but are resisted and replaced. Critical multiculturalism allows me to theoretically engage in the work of educational transformation and resistance insofar as addressing educational injustices and inequities are concerned. Doing this work, hopefully, means that students can have opportunities to live lives driven by freedom, justice, choice, and opportunity.

**Overview and Description of the Chapters**

As already discussed, this chapter provides the theoretical framing for the entire dissertation study. I provide an introduction to critical scholarship and a discussion of critical multiculturalism, which serves as a platform on which the following chapters are built. This chapter, like the next, situates the study in a broader social context. I stipulate the ways critical multiculturalism serves as the theoretical framing for this work, and I
justify why teachers and scholars interested in white students in rural schools might consider critical multiculturalism an appropriate theoretical frame of reference.

Chapter Two reviews selected literature on rural education, summarizing work on rural schools and the students within them. This chapter discusses why rural schools and communities are important, and some of the difficulties rural schools face. Here, the knowledge gaps become apparent in what we do and do not know about the experiences of students who live in rural communities, despite the numbers of rural students and rural schools in the United States. Inequity and systemic shortcomings are reviewed while themes of identity and agency are highlighted, revealing how students in varied rural contexts create and re-create their realities despite existing structural limitations.

Chapter Three presents narrative inquiry as the methodological approach that is used to explore the lives, schooling experiences, and future aspirations of student participants. I explicate the ways story, or narrative engagements, can be used in research and how this methodology compliments and supports the issues that have arisen in Chapters One and Two. Though there is a range of literature on both critical scholarship and storytelling as practice and pedagogy, there is little on the use of them paired together, particularly with rural youth. If at the heart of critical scholarship is the critique and questioning of institutional practices and systems, and if at the heart of narrative scholarship is the idea that individuals create and recreate their lives through stories (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000), then the two are not mutually exclusive. Instead, they can function in complementary ways (see McShay, 2010).

In Chapter Four the students’ stories emerge. Here, I present the narratives of three rural youth—Greg, Claire and Alexa—as they talk about their lives and aspirations.
for the future. Greg’s narrative demonstrates a passionate interest in car racing which is equal to and at times greater than his lack of interest in high school, an experience he has found to be “a waste of time.” Claire’s story critiques the push toward college or “college as the answer to every question.” Although she plans to become a cosmetologist and take over her family business, Claire has experienced an ongoing pressure to “do more with her life,” which is a slight against the family and community with whom she strongly identifies. Finally, Alexa reveals her view of high school as a bridge to a brighter future, although she has not taken the necessary steps to enroll in a community college program.

In chapter five, I return to the research questions and examine the themes in, and lessons from, the students’ stories as I consider the larger implications of this dissertation study and the next steps for this line of research.
Chapter 2: Rural Schools, Rural Students – Literature Review

According to Schafft (2010), rural schools “hold enormous symbolic, cultural and economic importance to the communities in which they serve” (p. 280) and yet, despite the numbers of students in the United States being educated in rural schools, the body of research on this population remains relatively small (Coladarci, 2007). Rural schools often serve as social and cultural community centers that educate multiple generations of families, and the deleterious effects of closing schools in rural communities impacts the educational, social, cultural and familial ties that bind people (Bard, Gardener, Wieland, 2005). In other words, many rural schools serve as sites in which shared educational and historical contextual experiences for community members are fostered in ways that transmit and maintain local identities, lore, and tradition (Morton & Harmon, 2011; Schafft & Jackson, 2010; Wake, 2012).

Yet, these same schools are expected to conform to a national education agenda that is designed without taking rural schools into full consideration (Arnold, 2005). While this standards driven era “removes local decision making” (Foster, 2004, p. 181) such that policy- and curricular decision-making often embodies a differing set of values to those of the community, placing rural schools at the crux of a culture clash which potentially threatens local identity and community survival (Corbett, 2013a; Schafft & Jackson, 2010). For example, rural education scholarship notes considerable tensions in the field related to the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation and to the subsequent
overemphasis on testing, accountability measures, standardized curricula, and educational reform (Arnold, 2005; Edmondson & Butler, 2010; Schafft & Jackson, 2010). Along with these tensions are the increasing realities associated with accelerated changes in the local economy that cause population decline (Carr & Kefalas, 2012) and poverty among rural students (Weber, Jensen, Miller, Mosley and Fisher, 2005; Strange, Johnson, Showalter & Klein, 2012).

Furthermore, rural communities are experiencing an outmigration of young people (Carr & Kefalas, 2010) supported in part by the current philosophy of today’s education system which is heavily influenced by its own narratives (Foster, 2004), neoliberal leanings and emphasis on globalization (Schafft, Killeen, & Morrissey, 2010). Rural schools are expected to operate under the premise of modernity, with a push to educate youth as mobile, adaptable, and “flexibly responsive to changing labor market conditions” (Schafft & Jackson, 2010, p. 2) and who seek to “systematically elevate rural people themselves” (Corbett, 2013b, p.2). It is a system that promotes the production of “effective workers who can compete in the global economy” (Foster, 2004, p. 180) and serves to encourage rural youth to leave their communities and only imagine themselves in more urbane lives (Brooke, 2012; Corbett, 2006; Howley & Howley, 2010). That is, curriculum is designed and delivered under the assumption that living in urban/suburban spaces is and should be the desired destination even for rural youth.

In mainstream discourse, “rural” is often unseen, trivialized, considered irrelevant or “nowhere” (Donehower, Hogg, & Schell, 2012; Theobold, 2012), and positioned as the “antithesis of modernity” (Corbett, 2013b). Complex problems may be simplified by casting them as character traits (Corbett, 2013a), rendering the nuanced, diverse, and
varied lives of rural people—and indeed their communities—unacknowledged (Donehower, et al., 2012). This dissertation study emphasizes the voices of rural students by highlighting their educational narratives and desires, on the one hand, and by considering the context of rural scholarship and the ongoing marginalization of rural youth, on the other hand.

In particular, this chapter reviews the issues listed above in its attempt to situate this dissertation within the literature on rural education, broadly, and rural youth, specifically. By highlighting current issues in the literature on rural education and youth, this chapter examines some of the ways rural youth might experience systemic inequality and oppression throughout their schooling experiences. As will be argued, these things (systemic inequality and oppression) result, in large part, from the narrow view taken by some public school educators and researchers that limits students’ opportunities to envision a variety of career and life choices that are situated within their rural community contexts.

This discussion lends itself to how the “commonsense” frames—those accepted and un-critiqued beliefs through which many people come to envision education (Kumashiro, 2008)—distort the ways in which rural schools and the students within are viewed throughout the United States. Additionally, this discussion allows me to place heightened awareness on rural adolescents’ reflections on schooling in order to explore how their various narrative engagements (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990) reveal their post-high school aspirations. Therefore, in this chapter, I outline major issues, concepts, and findings in studies of rural youth in ways that provide justification for how I will, in Chapter 4, focus on the stories and narrative engagements of students attending a rural
high school in the United States Midwest. As an outsider—a researcher who neither grew up nor attended school in a rural context—this literature review also provides me with a critical interpretation of some of the lived conditions, realities, and community contexts of rural students.

In thinking about the literature about rural students and schools, I turn to Schafft (2010), who, in writing a conclusion for an edited text on rural education, repetitively asks the following questions: “To whom is education accountable? Whose purpose does it serve?” (pp. 276, 277, 285). I begin here, then, with these questions because in considering rural students and rural schools, it seems prudent to begin with the bigger issue of public education and the intent of contemporary schooling in relation to rural schools. I do this in order to delineate some of the myths and beliefs that are held about, and indeed that shape public perceptions of, rural schools and their abilities to educate students. Then, I highlight some of the suggested pedagogical solutions and rural school exemplars that are featured in the literature as I return to the questions posed by Schafft (2010). Doing these things helps me to think about my study and collected data related to the narrative engagements of rural students attending Shady Grove High School (see Chapter 4).

The Role of Rural Schools

Why is ‘rural’ important?

During their ethnographic study of a rural community in Iowa, Carr and Kefalas (2009) ask research participants why rural is important, and they note that while participants declare that rural really does matter, they oftentimes struggled to provide a
good explanation for why. Considering America’s rural Heartland, Carr and Kefalas (2009) reflect that we should care about rural because, “this is where our food comes from, it is the place that helps elect our presidents… and it is the place that sends more than its fair share of young men and women to fight for this country” (p. ix). Relatedly, Corbett (2006, 2013) emphasizes the environmental importance of rural place by noting that these communities often serve as “stewards of the land and sea” (2013, p.2). The importance of rural communities cannot be underestimated, and the value of rural schools—to educate a large number of American youth across the nation—cannot be undervalued.

The 2011-2012 report, “Why Rural Matters?” (Strange et al., 2012)—a biannual report produced by the National Rural Education Association on rural students in the United States—relied on census data to report that there are 9,628,501 students living in rural school districts in the United States. Furthermore, across the United States there are 33% of schools in any one state that are designated as rural schools, though the range is large. For instance, in Massachusetts only 6.6% of the State’s schools are rural while in South Dakota 78.6% of the schools are rural. Across all 50 States, 20.2% of all public school students are enrolled in rural school districts, with rural students making up over 50% of the school age demographic in Mississippi, Vermont, and Maine. Additionally, over 33% of the school-based population in North Carolina, South Dakota, South Carolina, Alabama, Tennessee, North Dakota, Kentucky, West Virginia, New Hampshire, Arkansas, Georgia, Iowa, and Montana are rural. These percentages can best be understood through an assertion made by Strange et al. (2012), who concede that rural is important because:
Meeting the needs of more than 9.6 million children is a challenge that demands and deserves the attention of a nation. It is also a challenge that calls for looking at issues from multiple perspectives in order to develop informed understandings that move beyond overly simplistic notions about rural schools and the communities they serve (pg. 1)

Although rural communities continue to exist, many of them are struggling for survival due to a plethora of social and economic issues. Some of these issues include: 1) a lack of racial and cultural diversity; 2) limited access to the financial capital that would help local businesses and community services flourish, 3) a self-sustaining rural government, and 4) strong social and physical infrastructures (see Flora et al., 1992). In Chapter 5 of this dissertation, I will return to the question of the importance of rural communities by highlighting the larger implications of studying rural schools and rural youth.

**Difficulties rural schools face.**

Many rural communities in the United States are fading from the map because of a variety of economic reasons. Undoubtedly, the changing job landscape in the United States spurs outmigration from rural to urban and suburban areas (Crockett, Shanahan, & Jackson-Newsome, 2000; Gibson & Argent, 2008; Johnson, Elder, & Stern, 2005; Ley, Nelson & Beltyukova, 1996). In their book, *Hollowing out the middle: The rural brain drain and what it means for America*, Carr and Kefalas (2009) studied a small town in Iowa in an attempt to understand the rural brain drain and the factors that influenced who stayed and who left small, rural communities in the United States. Their study included
observations and interviews with students, school staff, and community members (those who presently lived in the community as well as those had moved away for college). They also paid attention to the ways communities themselves approached their youth and cast them as either “Achievers” (those who would inevitably go on to college) or as “Stayers” (those who would not leave the community). Carr and Kefalas developed two additional categories, which they termed the “Seekers” (those students who joined the military or left for other non-academic reasons) and the “Returners” (those students who left their rural communities, typically as Seekers, and then returned when what they sought was not met or achieved). Here, I will focus primarily on the findings from the “Achievers” and “Stayers” by highlighting the differential treatment these students reportedly experienced—which is consistent with findings across the literature on rural education. As I will eventually argue, Carr and Kefalas’ descriptions of “Achievers” and “Stayers” relate to the rural students I feature in my own dissertation study.

Carr and Kefalas’ (2009) work was guided by a concern to address the rural brain drain and determine ways to encourage students to remain in their rural communities as a way to regenerate such communities as vibrant and viable areas. In addition to talking to community members, Carr and Kefalas used a wide lens approach to examine both the strengths and weaknesses of policies and programs in the state of Iowa that have encouraged young people to return to their rural communities. One of the revealing findings was that the path students take (to stay, to leave, to return) are not random, given that rural educators, parents, and other influential community members often played an early role in rural students’ success. Admittedly, this success was predicated on adults providing the fewest choices and resources to some students, which highly encouraged
them to remain in their rural communities, while providing extra support, time, and energy to other students they determined were most likely to succeed in school and most likely to venture away from their home community. For example, Carr and Kefalas note that some students—typically the Achievers—were provided additional tutoring support while other students—typically the Stayers—were offered limited affordances if they did not initially meet academic expectations.

Carr and Kefalas (2009) write, “Stayers do not drift off course without the complicity of adults.” They continue, “when they skipped class, no one came looking for them, and when they didn’t turn in homework, their parents shrugged their shoulders and told them to find a job” (p. 65). These actions serve to limit one segment of the population (the “Stayers”), while potentially guaranteeing the success of another segment (the “Achievers”), placing the community in an often-tenuous situation—who stays, who leaves, and what are the consequences of both for the community? Their solution, which they presented to a local school board in the state of Iowa, encouraged educators and community members to invest equally in the students who remained in the community, making sure that they are supported and productive members of society. Carr and Kefalas (2009) findings (particularly around educational preparation, issues of equity, and the categorizations of students) are prevalent in the literature about rural communities, schools, and youth (Brantlinger, 2008; Schafft & Jackson, 2010). Such findings illustrate how some rural students are systemically stymied while others are supported.

Another notable finding from Carr and Kefalas’ (2009) study is that educated professionals who did eventually return to their rural Iowa communities did not do so because of government incentives, but because of family connections. This point
illustrates the importance of family and relationships in the maintenance of vibrant rural communities and the desire of some to return to their rural homes. Carr and Kefalas’ major conclusion—that community members need to consider how their future, especially the sustainability of their rural communities, traditions, and ways of life, are impacted by their interactions with and categorizations of young people—speaks to how rural schools are or are not adequately preparing students in ways that support community endeavors (Brooke, 2012).

As stated above, it also speaks to the notion of rural sustainability found in the literature on rural education. In Reclaiming the Rural, Donehower, Hogg, and Schell (2012) suggest that sustainability is a better metaphor for issues of rural education than some of those that have been adopted in the past, including preservation, abandonment, and modernization. In fact, they write that sustainability might be a useful way to think about educating students to be successful, productive members of their communities.

While metaphors can serve to help us better understand abstract concepts (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980), it is Kumashiro (2008, 2012) who posits that we view education through various “frames” that structure our comprehension of a phenomenon. For example, Kumashiro invites us to consider who is really to blame for the declining educational performance of students in public schools and the actual cause of America’s achievement gap. These considerations or frames, to use Kumashiro’s term, are both politically aligned and motivated. Frames are often premised on assumptions, considered ‘commonsense,’ and thus part of an implicit belief system that is not questioned by the general population. Yet it is this belief system that shapes how we think about, plan, and implement education. As Eppley and Corbett (2012) write, “what we see and count is
essentially shaped by beliefs and assumptions” (p. 1). These frames, then, often dictate what education should be, rather than what it could be. They can serve as limitations and restrictions for imagining possibilities (see Kinloch, 2010).

Using Kumashiro’s (2008, 2012) terminology, these “frames”—or the shared ‘commonsense’ knowledge—are produced and reproduced in social interactions. Gee (2005) refers to these mutual understandings and ways of being, which enact and sustain these implicit shared beliefs, as Discourses. Gee (2005) writes that these “thoughts, words, objects, events, actions, and interactions” (p.7) all work together in ways that transmit and maintain what we often refer to as culture. These ideas, offered by both Gee and Kumashiro, are important as I consider the literature on public schools in rural communities—schools that are inseparable from, and indeed embedded within, certain social structures and existent frames. In the broadest sense, rural schools are expected to conform to a national agenda and government mandated programs at the same time that they have to account for the local expectations of teachers, parents, and community members related to what rural schools do, how they operate, how they categorize and prepare students (Carr & Kefalas, 2009; Morton & Harmon, 2011), and how they ensure that learning is taking place (Butler & Edmondson, 2012).

The systemic beliefs and myths about the function of schooling often provide justification for the larger decisions that are made about schools in the United States. One of these myths is the notion that the primary purpose of public education is to train young people to participate in the global economy (Schafft, 2010), with an unquestioned belief that “public education serves the economic imperative of capitalism by severing attachment to place and producing mobile, adaptable youth flexibly responsive to
changing labor market conditions” (Schafft & Jackson, 2010, p. 2). However, some rural communities view schools as a place to sustain rural agrarian lifestyles (Morton & Harmon, 2011), resulting in many rural students remaining in their communities and not explicitly participating in the global marketplace.

Political and economic forces, including policy agendas and education budgets, surround issues related to rural schooling, as highlighted by findings from the *Rural School Consolidation Report* (Bard, Gardener, & Weiland, 2005) prepared for the National Rural Education Association. Bard, Gardener and Weiland (2005) reviewed literature and issues related to rural school consolidation dating back to the 1800’s as they sought to understand the impetus behind ‘one size fits all’ views of schooling and the notion that ‘bigger is better’ that was used to justify the closing of small community school buildings in favor of larger regional institutions.

In addition to being more cost effective and efficient, fewer larger schools could be more easily controlled in terms of what and how students were learning (DeYoung & Howley, 1990), and an emphasis could be placed on industrialization (Foster, 2004). Furthermore, fewer larger schools enabled more centralized loci, which are easier to monitor, putting the expertise in the hands of the professionals which has long been the tendency in rural contexts where experts are sent in to ensure things are being done “properly” (Butler & Edmondson, 2012).

Bard, et al. (2005) also note that though school consolidation is a polemic issue, there is very little objective data critiquing the limited research which supported the ‘bigger is better’ line of reasoning and few challenged the notion that the quality of education is better in bigger schools. In 1988, the Nebraska Rural Community School
Association commissioned Jonathan Sher to research the matter and he concluded that school consolidation was a “incredibly inefficient, uncreative and wrenching method of solving a teacher supply/instructional delivery problem” (Sher, 1988, p. 25). More recent data on school size, however, varies with the recommended district size and leads Bard et al. (2005) to conclude that there is neither an ideal school size, generally, nor is there a certain school size which guarantees student success, specifically.

Decision- and policy-makers need to be aware of the multiple factors that come into play when deciding to close down a school. They must also take note of the detrimental effects school closings can have on communities (Morton & Harmon, 2011), especially for rural students from low socioeconomic backgrounds who tend to fare better in small schools (Bard, et al., 2005).

Budgets aside, practical matters such as population decline makes school closings necessary; however, Bard, et al. (2005) recommend that in district-wide school consolidations, each town should retain a school—an elementary, middle and high school—as a way to limit the impact school closings have on the town’s economy. Because rural schools are often highly valued by the community, losing schools can signal a potential end to the community and its infrastructure. As Morton and Harmon (2011) report, the closing of a school often means the relocation of families and a loss of custom that has long supported local businesses such as stores and restaurants.

Weber, Jensen, Miller, Mosley, and Fisher (2005) report that poverty, particularly persistent poverty in the United States, disproportionately affects individuals living in rural areas. In their literature review (of qualitative studies) on the issues exacerbating rural poverty, they found that in addition to economic variables, social isolation and local
power relationships were factors that played into rural poverty. In their literature review (of quantitative studies) on rural poverty, they concluded:

The odds of being poor are higher in rural areas. They are greatly affected by individual characteristics such as education, race, gender, and age; and community characteristics such as local unemployment rates and industrial structure. Yet the likelihood of being poor is higher in rural areas even after accounting for differences in community and individual characteristics (p. 407).

They do report that the lack of knowledge about rural poverty hampers the ability to design and implement efficacious public policy that supports rural communities and alleviates poverty. The issue of persistent poverty, especially the intergenerational, interfamilial cycle of poverty, are connected to broader conversations about class and the ways educational systems are often complicit in the replication of class divisions (Brantlinger, 2008; Finn, 2009; Willis, 1977).

**Rural communities and class.**

The promise of public schooling as a democratic institution enabling social mobility and meritocracy for all has long since been revealed as a failed promise due to the structural inequality built into the system and the unequal power relations that support the status quo (e.g. Finn, 2009; May & Sleeter, 2010; Willis, 1977). As discussed in Chapter One, there is considerable overlap between the theoretical foundation of critical multiculturalism and scholarship on rural education and on issues of class.

Notions of rural are often conflated with issues of class as well as poverty, and a plethora of research investigates the relationship between socio-economic and academic
variables, seeking correlations between standardized test performance and other factors that can predict school success. The economic status of parents is frequently cited to be highly correlated with success on standardized testing and thus a predictive measurement for student success, despite (or perhaps because of) the oft reported disconnect between curricular content, standardized testing, and the lived experiences of young people (Corbett, 2013b; Popham, 1999).

However, financial indicators are not the only factors that bind rural with talk of poverty and class, for the concepts of rural, poverty, and class themselves have seemingly coalesced in ways that problematize and reduce rural to a singular solution of “decontextualized, standardized, metrocentric education” (Corbett, 2013b, p. 2). Yet if schools assume that youth will not succeed based on their parental income and education levels, then surely the more equitable approach to working with them is to provide resources (small ratios of teachers to students, higher spending per student) on those youth who are statistically at financial or economic risk (without assuming that they are bound to academically fail).

Heath (1983) and Phillips (1992), who each conducted decade-long ethnographic research studies in communities and schools, found that the communication styles of children and parents did not meet the language and literacy expectations of the schools these children would enter. Although Heath’s work was conducted in two working class rural communities in the Piedmont Carolinas and Phillips’ work was done on an Indian reservation in Oregon, they similarly concluded that schools favor a segment of their entering school age population who already meet Dominant Academic English (DAE; see Kinloch, 2010; Paris & Alim, 2014; Smitherman, 1977) standards because the education
system unfortunately privileges a specific model of language and literacy socialization aligned with more affluent, DAE speaking children.

Furthermore, schools deliver curricular content in a way that matches not only the style of parenting and learning that occurs in these DAE homes, but also reflects the lived experiences of these children. Thus, children from linguistically and culturally diverse communities who are defined by a lower socioeconomic status than their more economically affluent peers are placed at a disadvantage in multiple ways. As Howard (2010) notes, “unfortunately the manner in which culture manifests itself for students is frequently not understood in schools and is not used effectively to embrace teaching and learning for all students” (p. 51).

The work of Anyon (1980, 1981), Willis (1977), Oakes (1985), and more recently Finn (2009) further reports that schools willingly and knowingly perpetuate class based divisions by tracking young people in a way that reflects a class-based labor force. Schools serve as the definitive ‘sorting grounds’ for youth, with communities and schools stratifying expectations and rewards for and to students based on the income of their parents. This point is revealed in Brantlinger’s (2008) study of a group of economically affluent and non-affluent youth. Brantlinger writes about the discord she witnessed across both student groups in regards to expectations that hindered their freedom to fully explore their identities as students and community members. She wrote about Marissa, an “elite student” (p. 148) who lived in an expensive neighborhood and who was an honors student, a cheerleader, and a member of a “prestigious swing choir” (p. 148). She also wrote about Travis, an economically poor student who was one of four brothers, and whose brothers’ reputations colored Travis’ school experiences. Although Travis
received good grades, absenteeism and his father’s death (along with legal threats warranted by the school because of his absences) prompted him to drop out.

Brantlinger (2008) documented that Marissa experienced stress and anxiety surrounding failure, and Travis experienced bitterness and resignation, points that allowed Brantlinger to note that “adolescents are not passive imitators of class-distinctive ways of being; rather, they are agents that perform class-distinctive roles in innovative ways, and thus they actively contribute to the reproduction of class roles in their own social settings” (p. 154). Brantlinger’s work, much like that of Anyon (1980) and Finn (2009), elucidates ways that the people in schools (both students and staff) respond to perceived class differences. Both the “grits” (the poor students who live in the country) and the “preppies” (the popular students who live in the city), local labels that highly correlated with family wealth (see Bessette, Lowe & Quinn, 2008), reported that teachers have more tolerance, and trust, for the latter group and give them more autonomy. While teachers more punitive with, have less trust for, and provide little to no autonomy to the former group (Brantlinger, 2008). These responses are detrimental to how both groups of students come to see themselves and their counterparts in school and in the larger world (see also Carr & Kefalas, 2009).

Brantlinger (2008) as well as Carr and Keflas (2009) reflect on the role of educators in perpetuating class divisions. In the United States, the perception is that character traits (e.g. working hard or being lazy) are indelibly linked to affluence and
poverty, and this results in a belief that an individual’s financial status is a product of how they hard work, despite the structural limitations that thwart generational mobility (Finn, 2009; Willis, 1977). Similarly, Howley and Howley (2010) write about the ways class is both perceived and responded to in rural schools. They highlight that oftentimes schools perpetuate an agenda that promotes upward mobility, middle class values, and college attendance. The underlying and dangerous implication here is that students can “do better” than their families who remain in rural communities. I take up this idea in Chapter Five when I discuss the narrative engagements of my focal students in this dissertation study.

Rural Students: To Whom is Education Accountable? Whose Purpose Does it Serve?

In thinking about rural youth, their schooling, and their future aspirations, I consider again the question of educational accountability and purpose as posed by Schafft (2010), and wonder further: What does it mean to learn? What are we teaching students? And, to what end? In Chapter Four of this dissertation study, I report on the various ways my focal students grapple with these questions and others like them in their narrative engagements about their education and their futures. In the following section, I discuss selected research on learning that supports a more expansive vision of education, particularly in contemporary public schooling.

5 What we are really talking about here is meritocracy.
**A narrow view of learning.**

Given that the political focus of public schooling is currently on standards and assessment with teachers facing increasing pressure to teach the test (Ayers, Ladson-Billings, Michie, & Dee, 2008), the message that is communicated is that students across the United States must know a finite, predefined set of facts and applications regardless of the varied contexts and experiences they already have from non-school environments. Problematically, the focus on standards and assessments at the expense of students’ funds of knowledge (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992) privileges certain information that has been determined by educational “experts” and policymakers as valuable and necessary (Foster, 2004). According to Bard, Gardener, and Weiland (2005), historically “parents and educators in rural communities who were interested in preparing students for life rather than educating them as “human capital” to contribute more to the nation’s well-being, were considered backward and not knowledgeable enough to know what was best for education” (p.4). In addition to being viewed as “backward and not knowledgeable” is the reality that parents and educators are not often invited into conversations about what is taught and how students might actually ‘use’ or apply said knowledge in their day-to-day lives.

Increasingly educational researchers—particularly qualitative scholars in literacy studies—investigate how individuals deemed “illiterate” by formal education measures are highly literate in areas relevant to their lives. For example, Corbett (2010) studied the literacy practices of “illiterate” rural fishermen and found that they referred to magazines and other print materials related to fishing and they examined complex weather charts as they cross-referenced documents to make decisions related to their profession. Further, in
Rose’s (2001, 2004) ethnographic study of waitresses and other laborers, he documents the complexities of the demands required for the work and argues that “unskilled labor,” though valued less societally, requires a sophisticated skill set that often includes complex mathematical, reasoning, and planning skills.

Likewise, Greer’s (2012) study, which includes a focus on her grandmother’s life, examines rural women’s autobiographies and how they are positioned in light of the complexities of their work (related to home, farm, and family). Greer notes that her grandmother, Myrtle Tenney Booth (1906-1999), writes about her life in a way that “emphasized the public value of their [rural women’s] work rather than any private gains” (p. 91).

Using a variety of theoretical framings and methodological orientations, many educational researchers (Delpit, 2002; Lee, 2007; Kinloch, 2010) have argued that young people learn best when they can connect academic knowledge to their lives in meaningful ways. When the values of a community and the curricular content misalign, then marginalizing a segment of the student population seems inevitable and inequitable.

**A broader perspective.**

In support of student learning, Gustavson (2008) argues for bringing students’ out-of-school hobbies inside school; not to co-opt the curriculum, but to centralize opportunities for students to connect to content knowledge and demonstrate active skill sets as they learn in action. This approach to connect students out-of-school with their in-school experiences grew out of Gustavson’s (2008) observations that students were engaged in hobbies outside of his classroom where “they were fashioning discourses in
which to communicate with others. They were continuously representing themselves in refreshing ways as readers, writers, and thinkers” (p. 81). Students’ commentary and reflections in their out-of-class engagements made their responses to classroom assignments appear “prescriptive and unimaginative” (p. 81). Yet through extracurricular activities (such as turntablimg), students were developing many of the habits of mind and skills (such as self-reflection, interpretation, and evaluation of their own work) that Gustavson (2008) promoted in his classroom.

Further, Gustavson’s (2008) examination of pedagogy through the study of one student, Gil, and the student’s turntablimg skills leads him to reflect on how this student makes meaning in his life in ways that can influence classroom instruction. In Gustavson’s study, there is a call for understanding and observation, not with the intent to use turntablimg as a pedagogical strategy, but to recognize that learning is a social enterprise and that students make meaning in various ways that should be supported and recognized and where possible utilized in schools. Teachers have a role in creating classroom space and opportunities for students to demonstrate their various skills, talents, and interests as they experiment with what it means for learning to serve an experience (Dewey, 1938/1997; Greene, 1995).

As I consider Gustavson’s study, I recall Kinloch’s (2010) work with Phillip and Khaleeq (see page 23). She chronicles their experiences investigating urban gentrification by utilizing literacy practices to leverage community transformation. They do these things as active student-researchers and agents of community change. Similar to Gustavson (2008), Kinloch draws on the talents and resources of youth by documenting their engagements with literacy practices as they grapple with bigger issues of social
justice intrinsic to their community and to their literate identities. When students utilize their literacy skills in meaningful ways, as both Kinloch and Gustavson describe, then students are motivated to inquire into issues they see as personally and politically important; doing so increases the likelihood that they will continue to engage in similar activities in ways that not only strengthens their literacy skills, but also increases the ease and fluency of their participation in activity systems in schools and in the larger world. This point is equally important for rural students and their educational and community experiences.

**Identifying as rural.**

Young people, both inside and outside school, are constantly creating and recreating, defining and redefining their own identities (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000; Raible & Nieto, 2008) in regards to who they believe they are and seek to become. Additionally, students are often considering, contesting, and co-opting factors related to race, gender, and social class. These shifts with (as well as constructions of) identity are multifaceted, hybrid, and defy neat categorizations (Sadowski, 2008). Wrestling with issues of identity can play out in many ways in high school, as marked by some students’ desires to be included in social groups (e.g., athletes/jocks, geeks/high achievers) and as marked by students’ clothing choices, memberships into certain spaces and/or groupings, and language (Eckert, 2000).

The choices young people make about how to represent themselves are social productions (Vasudevan & Hill, 2008) that reflect on themselves as individuals as well as on their community, be it in virtual or face-to-face interactions. Vasudevan and Campano
(2009) write, “the expansive sense of self that many youth are experiencing in their out-of-school lives is being constricted or homogenized in schools” (p. 326). This constriction may occur in the way certain behaviors are punished or rewarded in school, or the way students with varied group membership may be dealt with under similar circumstances. Further, students may find their identities constrained by curricular content and classroom pedagogy (Raible & Nieto, 2008, p. 214).

While young people grapple with the simultaneous desires for autonomy/individuation and belonging/inclusion, such desires can play out in their attitudes (Noguera, 2008), hobbies (Gustavson, 2008), taste in music (Raible & Nieto, 2008), their use of literacy artifacts (Nichols, 2008), their willingness to engage with texts (Staples, 2008) and/or their behaviors in the classroom (Michie, 2009). Specifically, Staples (2008) used rap lyrics and a more expansive interpretation of literacy texts to engage a student in politically driven discussions about community in ways that encouraged the student to question her stance and alignment with other people.

The identities taken up by youth can be diminished when students are encouraged to demonstrate “normative” behaviors, as students are always managing their identity in different spaces, knowing where their identity is accepted and where there might be risks (Raible & Nieto, 2008). In many schools, certain voices are privileged as other voices are silent or silenced (Fine & Weiss, 2003), and this distinction replicates systemic power hierarchies in that certain students dominate conversations related to school experiences (also noted in Wiseman, 2009) and other students are marginalized for not displaying or identifying in normative ways (Blackburn, 2011).
For rural youth, identifying as ‘country’ may serve as a source of pride or badge of honor as opposed to a derogatory identifying label (e.g. Leyshon, 2008). Identifying as rural and with rural is important for many rural youth (see Wake, 2012), and from my data (chapter Four), such identification are equally important for students at Shady Grove (field notes, September 25, 2012), the site for my dissertation study. Thus, the relevance of discussing identification in this literature review is that pedagogical scholarship (see Lee, 2007; Delpit, 2002; Kinloch, 2010) demonstrates that when we understand the identities students choose as representative of who they are and who they want to be, we can deliver more effective teaching that is culturally relevant and critically salient.

Delpit’s (2002) writings about her own daughter’s rapid dialect acquisition in relation to her daughter’s cultural identification leads her to reflect on teaching Dominant Academic English (DAE) to students in rural Alaska. Delpit explains the significance for teachers and researcher to accept local dialects and languages as we seek to engage students in “school learning.”

As Delpit (2002) noted with her own daughter, when students perceive that they are being derided by educators (as I will discuss in Chapter Four), their subsequent willingness to identify with school can decrease. In her research on language and dialect, Delpit describes vernacular usage as a site of resistance because many students are told to select one (DAE norms and identities) over another (their home, familial, cultural languages and identities). In relation to identity, Wake (2012) worked with rural middle school students by using digital storytelling in the classroom. Looking at the themes generated in student’s digital texts, Wake concludes, “the adolescent search for self is not distinctive, but it is reliant on place… identity was influenced by students’ rural contexts”
Therefore, context is important in working with students in school and community contexts, especially rural students who have, for too long, been placed on the margins and have been “othered” by societal norms and expectations related to success, achievement, and belonging.

**Opportunity and rural youth.**

In a survey study of 679 rural eighth and ninth graders, Ludden (2011) concludes that students who participate in extracurricular religious or school based civic activities are more engaged in school, report better grades, and have more positive perceptions of parents and peers. While Ludden (2011) talks of the benefit of youth engagement in civic activities, Carr and Kefalas’ (2012) work suggests that community leaders and teachers are most likely to invest time, interest, and energy in students who are already doing well in school. It is those students who are struggling and most likely to leave school without their diploma who are excluded from these rich, civic activities because of family and/or work commitments. Thus, students who could potentially most benefit from extracurricular activities are the most likely to be excluded.

Amongst the findings in Irvin, Meece, Byun, Farmer, and Hutchins’ (2011) study of 6,247 rural high school students is a positive relationship between students’ subjective outcomes in their school experiences and their educational achievement and aspirations. Students who reported a greater sense of belonging and value in school also tended to do better. As Irvin et al. (2011) point out, “these findings are significant due to the malleability of schooling experiences when compared to changing structural
characteristics of schools” (p. 1237). This is important, particularly when we consider how adults often interact with young people in schools.

**Re-envisioning Rural: Preparing Rural Youth for Their Futures.**

In an article promoting a new vision of rural education, as a space for an “imaginative and generative,” “rural creative class” (Corbett, 2006, p. 299) writes that “it seems to me that the collective and individual intellectual power of rural adolescents might be focused on working through some of the vexing, pragmatic problems facing the community rather than giving the most able of them an abstract toolkit for elsewhere” (Corbett, 2006, p. 299). This quote guides the following sections where I report on research literature that views rural education and place-based pedagogies as having the potential to reimagine rural scholarship and support offered to rural students.

**Expanding the frame.**

Corbett’s (2013b) study on improvisational learning reports on a film and video project which included 200 middle school students from sixth to eighth grade. Through this work Corbett (2013b) writes about improvisation and creativity and the role both play in the education and lives of rural youth. He notes: “Space to improvise is what youth crave in school” (p. 4). He notes differences in the film and video work between the “English stream” students and the “French immersion” stream, two groups that basically self-select along socioeconomic lines; with middle class families choosing the French immersion program and most of the rural and working class families choosing the English stream. Corbett (2013b) reports that the working class and rural youth were “better improvisers” (p. 7) producing ironic and irreverent films. The middle class
students, however, had “an overall framework that allowed them to see the relevance of improvisation and of their own knowledge production and voice in school” (p.7).

Citing Lareau’s (2003b) ethnographic work, Corbett (2013b) found that “what working class children learned most effectively is how to be self-motivated and self-directed while middle class children learned how to navigate institutional systems with confidence” (p.7). Corbett (2013b) wonders, “how can we help marginal students come to believe that their voices, interventions, and improvisations are important in school in the same way middle class students do?” (p.7). This is a relevant question to consider, especially when working to engage students in narrative work and digital story telling projects. For Corbett (2013b), it is necessary for rural students and teachers to find a satisfactory balance between structure and creativity if students are to “shine” (p.7).

Wake (2012) also uses technology via digital storytelling to examine themes generated by students as they answer the question: “If you could tell the world about what life as a teenager in (name of the town) is like, what would you tell them?” (p. 28). Wake (2012) discussed advantages to this method including: writing for an authentic audience (the digital stories were shown at a community event), providing a “multimodal venue” to explore issues surrounding rural student identity, and motivating students through the appeal of technology. In her conclusion she notes that schools are often not capitalizing on student’s digital literacy practices and, similar to the sentiments of

6 When teachers were surprised by the work of a student (one who typically had poor or mediocre performance) they termed this the ‘shine’ factor, which was attributed to an allowance made possible by the filmmaking project.
Gustavson (2008), she encourages educators to invite students’ out-of-school digital writing practices into the classroom. Both of these studies (Corbett, 2013b; Wake, 2012) illustrate the creative capabilities of rural youth and provide models for classroom based storytelling/digital literacy projects similar to the work presented in this dissertation (see chapter Three).

**Place-based education.**

Rural communities often perceive a clash between post high school education and local values, where college, according to Johnson, Thompson, and Naugle (2009) is “a means by which young people are taken out of the communities they care about and that care about them” (p. 184). This conflict between family/community (place) and education is a false and unnecessary dichotomy in the conversation about rural education (Howley, Harmon & Leopold, 1996), and a divisive separation that shortchanges rural students. Howley, Harmon, and Leopold (1996) argue that the aspiration to a sense of place is not more or less valuable than other aspirations, but teachers who work toward helping students value place are working against the tide of information being delivered to rural communities via other mediums. They write:

> Educators know next to nothing about the kind of communities talented rural youth aspire to live in or how satisfied they are with their current communities. We do not know if or to what extent these students differ from their less academically oriented classmates. Such questions have not been asked before.

(p. 152)
Rural scholars (Butler & Edmondson, 2012; Howley et al., 1996) discuss the need and struggle to engage locality in rural public schools and rural communities, and the importance of supporting young people and community members as “stewards of the land” (Corbett, 2013b, p.2). In Johnson, et al.’s (2009) work they report on a model of “post-compulsory education and rural renewal” (p. 178) that they term “place-conscious capacity building” (p. 178). This is a model they developed to build university and community partnerships in an effort to form mutually beneficial relationships that channel university resources into rural communities in ways that “build and enhance resident capacity to sustain and revitalize communities in the region” (p. 178) as well as valuable teaching and learning opportunities for students (both at the university and in the community schools).

Johnson et al. (2009) report interest in providing relevant, meaningful educational experiences that have “practical value to the community” (p. 184), which came in part from reports that “students’ perceptions that the material that was taught and tested in school was not relevant to them” (Johnson, et al., 2009, p. 184). They describe place-based learning projects that occurred in two Kentucky counties. In the first initiative, community dialogue resulted in integrating place-based learning into the high school curriculum and the acquisition of an old cinema on the town square. The rehabilitation of the cinema met short-term goals (entertainment for children and youth) and long-term goals (the revitalization of the town center) and allowed for shared local expertise in construction and refurbishment with university expertise in analysis and planning.

The second project was related to the student data generated from state testing that are rarely understood or utilized in functional ways to improve student performance
and retention rates. There were concerns that high drop out rates negatively impacted the economic development of the community. This initiative was mutually designed to generate research-based recommendations, which could be used to inform policy and school based practices to improve outcomes for the school district (Johnson et al., 2009).

What is particularly notable about these two initiatives is how different they are, given that both counties are concerned about their youth and their communities’ economic development.

There are two other exemplars of place-based pedagogy that I shall include in this review to document the variety of ways in which schools have accommodated the notion of ‘place’ in the ways they operate. Firstly, Howley and Howley (2010) in a discussion of rural, class and poverty, reflect on the practices at a community school, which had a large Amish population within their community. Howley and Howley (2010) noted that the principal at this school had successfully negotiated community relationships to create a school curriculum that reflected the values of both the Amish and non-Amish (the “English”) families that attended the school. Howley and Howley (2010) note that, “in reflecting and responding to community expectations, the school also exhibited a culture of cooperation and support” and the “family-like ethos of the school matched community norms” (p. 40).

Secondly, Schafft (2010) describes St Mary’s Middle School, and their science curriculum which has developed an aquaculture facility –basically a trout farm- and greenhouse complex which integrates state academic standards with hands on place-based experience. Schafft (2010) reports “students are completely responsible for managing water quality, feeding, stocking, controlling for disease, and monitoring the
production of effluent. Students record data on trout health, feeding habits, stress levels, and appearance and they assist in maintaining tanks and fish waterways (p. 282). Further, Schafft (2010) writes “the greenhouse complex was developed as a natural extension of the aquaculture project and provides hands-on opportunity for students to investigate hydroponics and aquaponics as a means of addressing water quality” (p. 283).

The intent of these three examples (Johnson, et. al. 2009; Howley & Howley, 2010; Schafft, 2010) is to illustrate that a thoughtful consideration of local assets (physical and human) and needs, paired with the serious work of reconsidering and reconfiguring the delivery of education for the community, can result in an education that serves as a source of pride for educators, students, and parents alike. Johnson et al. (2009) demonstrated the partnership potential of universities, schools and communities working together. In the school Howley and Howley (2010) described, the school simply tailored its curriculum in ways that reflected the values of the community and thus the community in turn supported the school, presumably resulting in better outcomes for all. Schafft’s (2010) school built on community partnerships, grant opportunities and ingenuity to create an educational experience, that prepared student’s to meet curricular standards while learning about local habitat, and building their knowledge as environmental stewards (Corbett, 2013b).

Butler and Edmondson (2013) speak to this kind of work noting “this conceptualization of schooling [as places that enact value-laden, place-based pedagogy and community projects] involves tremendous responsibility of educators on behalf of their community and its children and is much harder work than complying with prescribed curricular and state mandates” (p. 234). I include these projects, because I
believe that where this dissertation work begins – storytelling with rural youth about their views and values and thoughts about their schooling— is an opening for conversations in the larger community about what school is, and does and should do.

In Conclusion

Youth are experts of their own lives (Delpit, 1995), and an increasing body of work is steadily reframing youth as engaged, creative, and active participants in their communities (Corbett, 2013b; Gustavson, 2008; Hill & Vasudevan, 2008; Kinloch, 2010) who present “a robust counternarrative to the prevalent image of the disaffected, disengaged youth” (Vasudevan & Campano, 2009, p. 328). Thus knowing what students want to learn and building curricular content from that place of knowing could enhance education in a myriad of ways. Importantly, it could engage students in a way that helps them see the value of education and the relevance of education in their lives. Considering rural youth as young people who regularly grapple with issues of identity and who utilize their talents to create and recreate meaning in their lives despite (and perhaps because of) existing structural limitations, may help educators to enact culturally relevant and culturally sustaining pedagogical practices inside rural public schools.
Chapter 3: Defining and Justifying Narrative Inquiry in the Study of Rural Youth and Education - Methodology

I once worked with a Head Start program in an old stately school building that housed both an elementary and a middle school in Chicago, Illinois. Geographically, the school building was located in an area not too far from the home of then senator Barack Obama and the University of Chicago. Yet the school’s playground was in disarray (with a cracked slide and other broken equipment), there was graffiti covering the external walls of the school, and there were heavy grates on the windows. Inside the preschool classrooms—located in the school’s basement—was an old, noisy, and clunky heating system, which audibly punctuated the school day. Undoubtedly, the overall physical appearance of the school and its outdated facilities did not mirror the material wealth of the neighboring community.

On one particular morning as I waited in the school’s front office to meet with, and provide program updates to, the principal, I noticed that sitting atop the check-in counter was a rather comprehensive list of student names. In the left-hand column of this list were the names all of the eighth grade students attending the school, and next to their names were the names of area high schools. As I scrolled down the list, I noted that row after row and column after column the word “denied” appeared next to every student’s name. These eighth grade students were all denied admission into the area schools, which made me wonder: What will the families of these students do? Where will these students
go? What was this school preparing students for if they were being denied entrance into area high schools? Why had this document had been left in public view?

Clandinin and Connelly (2000), who developed and pioneered the work on narrative inquiry as a methodology for studying education, believe that “we learn about education from thinking about life, and we learn about life from thinking about education. This attention to experience and thinking about education as experience is a part of what educators do in schools” (p. xxiv). Their sentiments encapsulate my feelings about the important connections among education, experience, and life (see also Dewey, 1938), given that a part of “what educators do in schools” is highly influenced by how people think about education, how people experience education, and hence, how people both live and learn in the world.

Additionally, Clandinin and Connelly’s (2000) assertion helps me to reflect on the story that opens this chapter, a story that serves as an impactful moment in which I began to question the purpose and function of education for historically marginalized public school students. Seeing the word “denied” listed next to the name of each and every eighth grade student at the school, for instance, forced me to question my own assumptions about and approaches to working with students. No longer could I rely solely on standardized test scores and numerical student gains “to learn about education” (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000, p. xxiv); instead, I needed to determine ways to listen to and document the varied experiences of public school students and their teachers (Kinloch & San Pedro, 2013). To do this work, then, I rely on narrative inquiry as a methodological approach that helps me, according to Clandinin and Connelly (2000), learn about life, think about education, and document experience.
In the remainder of this chapter, I discuss narrative inquiry as a viable and valuable methodology for conducting educational research. To begin, I define narrative inquiry as a methodological approach that involves the collection, description, and analysis of stories, or narratives, that people tell about themselves and about their lives (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). Then, I provide an overview of narrative inquiry and its methodological tenets, or dimensions, in relation to engaging in rigorous qualitative research that focuses on the production and exchange of stories (Clough, 2002; Ely, Vinz, Downing, & Anzul, 1997; Leavy, 2009; Oaks & Capps, 2001). Doing so leads into a detailed description of the context, the data collection processes, and the data analysis procedures used in conducting this dissertation study with young people in one rural high school located in the Midwestern region of the United States.

**Defining Narrative Inquiry**

The study of stories falls under the field of narratology, which encapsulates narrative work in a variety of social science fields, from sociology, linguistics, and anthropology to philosophy, drama, art, and English, to name but a few (Bruner, 2002; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Frank, 2010). There is, therefore, a wide array of scholars who have influenced the ways in which story is conceived and studied (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Clough, 2002; Stout, 2002). For the purposes of this dissertation study, the implementation of narrative inquiry is predominantly influenced by the work of Clandinin and Connelly (2000); however, I do rely on the scholarship of Bruner (2002) and Frank (2010) in order to consider the nature of stories, generally, and the production of stories by high school students, specifically.
Throughout this dissertation, I use the terms story and narrative interchangeably. In searching for clarity regarding the definition of these terms, I reviewed the ways in which scholars who inform my perspective on narrative inquiry both conceptualize and utilize ‘story’ and/or ‘narrative’ in their own work. I found that qualitative inquirers define ‘narrative’ in various ways (Polkinghorn, 1995), and the scholars who influenced my decision to implement this methodology also approach these two terms in different ways. Clandinin and Connelly (2002) define narrative as the “phenomenon and the method of social sciences” (p. 18) and they understand narrative inquiry as “stories lived and told” (p. 20). In fact, they use the term “narrative” to describe narrative inquiry as both a method and a story related to specific instances or examples of data.

Ochs and Capps’ (2001) understanding of the term “narrative” refers to conversations that are created in social exchanges. Such social exchanges, for Ochs and Capps, help to “account for the ways in which narratives of personal experience are realized in everyday social life around the world” (p. 54). Important to note here is that while Ochs and Capps explicitly use the terms “narratives” and “personal experience” to describe their perspectives, they do not use of the word “story” (see a discussion of the term “story” by King, 2003). Similar to Ochs and Capps’ understanding of “narrative” is that of Maynes, Pierce, and Laslett (2008), who refer to narratives as experiences that include the personal and the subjective—their use of the phrase, “personal narratives,” is indicative of this latter point. While these scholars would probably agree that a “narrative” can be an overarching story that encapsulates many small stories, the term “story” does not typically encompass multiple narratives (but it might!). Bruner (2002) does away with strict definitions and uses the terms “narrative” and “story” fairly
interchangeably, collapsing the concepts, interested mainly in the “road rather than about the inn to which it leads” (p. 20).

While Frank (2010) makes “no attempt to define story,” he does define narrative as something that happens because of something else (p. 25), like the ticking of a clock: “In narratives, things happen tick, tock” (p. 26). Each tick sets up the expectation for the tock, or for what is to follow. And, yet, narrative inquiry is more than a tick and a tock; it is more than an inquiry into a cause and effect. Narrative inquiry is an entanglement between researcher and participants who are, simultaneously, living, making meaning, and collaborating—they are, in fact, living stories in spaces and places over time. The researcher enters and departs the research narrative whilst the living continues—changing, shifting, being interpreted, and being reinterpreted (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

In other words, narrative inquiry is a methodology for exploring the events that unfold in lives, the experiences people have, and the ways people subsequently respond to them. As a methodology, narrative inquiry considers both the individual and the social, and provides a way not only think about cause and the effect (the tick and the tock), but to consider the ways in which people (researchers and participants) are entangled, one with another.

**An overview of narrative inquiry in relation to education.**

In Dewey’s 1938 book on experience and education he states, “I assume that amid all uncertainties there is one permanent frame of reference: namely, the organic connection between education and personal experience” (p. 25). Dewey’s (1938/1997)
theorizations of experience and education serve as premise for Clandinin and Connelly’s (2000) conceptualization of narrative inquiry as a methodology. Dewey (1938/1997), like others who have followed (e.g. Greene, 1995), maintains that learning occurs because of the rich, connected experiences among people—experiences that promote educational, personal, and social growth. Thus, “genuine education” (p. 25) results from meaningful experiences people have with one another and in the world.

Dewey’s emphasis on “genuine education” is significant for how Clandinin and Connelly (1989) think about narrative inquiry as an approach for the deliberate “storying and restorying [of] one’s life” and as “a fundamental method of personal (and social) growth: it is a fundamental quality of education. So-called ‘narrative research’ can only build on this process of growth” (p.2). Furthermore, the researcher’s narrative—a written, oral, and/or performative text, for instance—is a restorying of an occurrence and a continuum of the reflective experiences that happen as the researcher interacts with others and proceeds through life (Clandinin & Connelly, 1989).

Because narratives are about experiences, according to Connelly and Clandinin (1990), “this general notion translates into the view that education is the construction and reconstruction of personal and social stories [and] teachers and learners are storytellers and characters in their own and other’s stories” (p. 2). In education, generally, and in narrative inquiry, specifically, story “brings theoretical ideas about the nature of human life as lived to bear on educational experiences as lived” (p.3). Stories and/or narratives do not just report on everyday experiences; they shape everyday experiences (Bruner, 2002) and “imbue life events with temporal and logical order” (Ochs & Capps, 2001, p. 2). Narrative is the home for our rhythms, our emotions, our tempo, the looking back and
anticipating forward, and it is through narrative that we “make sense of our existence in time” (Freeman, 2010, p.39).

Through story, individuals voice concerns, thoughts, and beliefs and can, thus, make changes in their own lives (Frank, 2010). Stories tend to bestow reality on experiences (Bruner, 2002), and this dissertation study, for example, examines the stories and experiences of students who are often silenced or invisible in contemporary classrooms (Christensen, 2008; Greene 1995) because of their lived experiences, academic performances, and academic and professional choices post-high school graduation (see Chapter 4).

For Frank (2010), “stories project possible futures, and those projections affect what comes to be, although this will rarely be a future projected by the story. Stories do not just have plots. Stories work to emplot lives” (p.10). I interpret Frank’s claim to mean that stories do not predicate specific outcomes or futures (“stories do not just have plots”). However, as I will discuss in Chapters 4 and 5, as stories “emplot lives,” so too do they have the potential to help individuals see their choices and decisions differently (Frank, 2010). In Bailey’s (2011) work, students produced and exchanged personal stories as a way to heal and transform their lives and communities. Relying on a methodological framework of narrative inquiry to engage in acts of storytelling might potentially encourage students, in particular, to reflect, live, and relive educational experiences.

Additionally, Frank (2010) asserts that stories serve as accounts and “accounts make actions at least recognizable and understandable to third parties, if not necessarily legitimate and acceptable” (p. 30). Both Frank (2010) and Bruner (2002) believe that
stories give individuals the power to see possibilities by telling a different story about themselves and their lives, which could encourage individuals to live or imagine in these variations. In other words, stories “offer alternative worlds that put the actual one in a new light” (Bruner, 2002, p. 10). Bruner (2002), Bell (2010), Frank (2010), as well Holstein and Gubrium (2000) all suggest that through the act of storytelling, rich opportunities emerge for students to reconsider and reconstitute the narratives by which they live.

Hankins (2003), for example, uses journaling practices to describe and analyze a year in her first-grade classroom, focusing on her growth as an educator and the experiences she had with several first grade students in her tutelage. In one of her stories, she documents how she worked with a student, Kenny, as he sought to reframe his self-proclaimed identity that originally likened “African” and “black” to “hated” and “ugly.” Kenny came to see himself “as king and would-be professor” (Hankins, 2003, p. 65) by emphasizing his racial and cultural heritage in a positive light and by adopting the message that he is “smart.” Hankins (2003) writes about Kenny’s increasing resilience and confidence, and the impact that his restorying of self had on how others came to see him in and out of the classroom. According to Hankins, Kenny was “reframing his stories and putting himself in charge of them” (p. 72).

children’s stories and supporting the class as students acted these stories out provided opportunities for “the incredible ability of children to create moments of hopefulness for one another” (p. 114). While Paley’s work illustrates that storytelling was a connective activity for many students, she also reveals it is not always possible to anticipate students’ reactions or the directions in which stories take us (see also Frank, 2010).

In addition to the scholarship of Hankins (2003) and Paley (1998) is Kinloch’s (2010) work, which relies on narratives to describe the lives, literacy practices, and activist efforts of high school students within an English classroom and local community. The point here is that these scholars—despite the variety of ways they use narrative and despite the differences in the ages of the students with whom they work—all leverage stories told with, by, and about young people to demonstrate educational possibility and student capability. They look at both the individual student and a community of students in the midst of larger social contexts as they share student stories in and around schooling. These are some of the scholars who provide a vision for me to use narrative inquiry in this dissertation study.

Further, we see in the work described above (Hankins, 2003; Kinloch, 2010; Paley, 1998) that the way the students connect with and interpret stories is highly individual, yet is always occurring within a specific social-cultural context (in the classroom AND in the community) that contributes to the meaning making process (Also Bell, 2010). As Frank (2010) notes, “people tell stories that are very much their own, but they do not make these stories up by themselves” (p.14).

Heath’s (1983) ethnographic work in Roadville and Trackton provides further evidence of this as she documents the different aspects of narrative engagement that are
reinforced in her communities of study by noting the adult’s responses to the children’s stories (see also Michaels, 1981). In one community, “highly creative fictionalized accounts” (p. 184) are encouraged, in the other the stories are expected to be factual with limited exaggeration. Further, one community “uses stories to reaffirm group membership and behavioral norms, the other to assert individual strengths and powers” (p. 184). One community introduces stories with a formulaic opening, the other rarely. One community expects “a strict chronicity” (p. 185) in the other community the temporal order of the narrative is of little importance. Heath’s (1983) work clearly illustrates how an individual’s use of narrative form as well as selection of content (e.g. salient details) develops through observation, practice and participation (also Rogoff, 2003) under the influence of community and culture mores, which can also include classroom practices (Michaels, 1981).

In this brief overview of narrative inquiry in educational research, it is essential that I highlight Bruner’s (2002) argument that an engagement with narrative work serves as an invocation of multiple meanings and understandings of texts, or stories. In relation to this dissertation study, Bruner’s argument motivates me to document and consider the stories (e.g., digital, written, and spoken texts) these white rural high school students produce and exchange about their educational experiences, and to think about the ways these stories reveal systemic educational inequities.

More specifically, I take up narrative inquiry as an appropriate methodology for this dissertation study because, as Gay (2010) claims, “stories educate us about ourselves and others; they capture our attention on a very personal level, and entice us to see, know, desire, imagine, construct” (pp. 2-3). Furthermore, as Ladson-Billings (2009) states,
“story has gained credence as an appropriate methodology for transmitting the richness and complexity of cultural and social phenomena” (p. xvi), and through this transmission, narrative inquiry “is a way of knowing that involves a process of self-insertion in the other's story as a way of coming to know the other's story and as giving the other voice” (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 4). Important in this discussion is the idea, as articulated by Frank (2010), that “the storyteller speaks but the story teaches” (p. 25)—a point that I will examine throughout this dissertation study.

Morrison (2000) said, “narrative is radical, creating us at the very moment it is being created” (p.27), which is very much in line with Frank’s (2010) view on the power of stories. In educational settings, we see that when students engage in meaningful and culturally relevant writing, reading, and pedagogical practices they thrive academically and socially (Kinloch, 2010; Lee, 2007). Teachers and researchers find that when expecting more from students whilst simultaneously engaging them in interesting work that reflects their lived experiences, students meet and exceed their demands (Kinloch, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2009). This could be re-interpreted from a narrative stance to suggest that when students are given a chance to create their stories, they thus have the power to transform the stories they live.

Utilizing a methodological approach of narrative inquiry to investigate the educational stories of (and about) young people allows me to gain insight into how they make sense of, and think about the value of, their education insofar as their future lives are concerned. In fact, a narrative inquiry approach can supplement the current literature on rural students and rural education that positions them as invisible and underperforming in relation to their suburban counterparts. In this repositioning of rural students (who, in
this dissertation study, are not college-bound) from invisible to visible, insights about
their educational experiences, lived conditions, and desires for their future are analyzed in
light of Dewey’s (1938) insistence that “the organic connection between education and
personal experience” (p. 25) must be realized.

Tenets, or dimensions, of narrative inquiry.

Most narrative scholars (Bell, 2010; Bruner, 2010; Maynes, Pierce, & Laslett,
2008) understand narratives as personally and socially constructed and contextually
bounded. Further, it seems self-evident to state that narratives, or stories (and I use them
interchangeably in this dissertation) are ‘audience’d - sometimes because there is specific
intent or gain in the telling of the story (Bruner, 2002), sometimes as a way to capture the
listener’s attention (Ochs & Capps, 2001) - with the storyteller responsible for making
adaptations based on who the listeners are. Even with these two general understandings
of narrative there remains a plethora of differing scholarly perspectives on the
dimensionality (and thus the interpretation) of narrative inquiry.

Narrative inquiry is often described as a “dimensional space” (Clandinin &
Connelly, 2000), as having “turns” (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007), and as a “lens” (Chase,
narrative inquiry exists within a three dimensional space that is based on foundational
notions derived from Dewey’s (1938) understanding of experience: situation, continuity,
and interaction. The dimensions of this metaphorical space are personal and social
(representing interaction and engagement), past, present, and future (representing
continuity and time), and place (denoting location and situation). That is, any narrative
inquiry will include a temporal dimension, a balance between the personal nature of the inquiry and the larger social context. In addition, these dimensions all occur in a specific place or sequence of places (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, pp.49-50).

The personal and social dimensions of narrative inquiry are *inward* and *outward* (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000): the researcher looks inward to the self while simultaneously looking outward at the experiences unfolding around the self. In the data this might be reflected in journals and recollections of emotional responses (inward) juxtaposed with environmental observations, interview transcripts, or other data that connect to the social element (outward) or the “why” of one’s inquiry. Additionally, Clandinin and Connelly (2000) use *forward* and *backward* to talk about the natural temporal shifts of examining present time, while recollecting on past time (both researcher and participant).

In their review of narrative research, Pinnegar and Daynes (2007) note four *turns* or movements that occur in the thinking and action of narrative inquirers. Suggesting that these movements are essential to the spirit of narrative methodology, they argue that “how fully the researcher embraces narrative inquiry is indicated by how far he or she turns” (p. 7). The turns, which are not ordered or sequential, and are usually a part of an “idiosyncratic journey” (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007, p. 7), are: a notable change in the relationship between the researcher and the researched within the context of study as indicated by a movement away from objectivity and toward greater relational understanding; a focus on words as data, which allows for nuanced explorations into the complexity of human behavior and meaning making; a move away from the general to the “power of the particular” with an interest in “specific places at specific times”
(Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007, p. 24); and, a widening acceptance of diverse epistemologies and ways of knowing.

In her review of narrative literature, Chase (2005) documents that there are approximately five analytic lenses that narrative inquirers take. According to Chase, the five lenses are: narratives as a distinct form of discourse, narratives as verbal action, stories as enabled and constrained, narratives as socially situated interactive performances, and the researcher as narrator (pp.656-657). Together these analytic lenses are applicable to both the researched (the participants) and the researching (the researcher). Similarly, Ochs and Capps (2001) view the dimensions of personal narrative as involving tellership, tellability, embeddedness, linearity, and moral stance. These dimensions have a spectrum of possibilities from one active teller (in regards to tellership), to multiple active co-tellers (in terms of tellability and embeddness). These dimensions provide a framework for analyzing story scripts, with an understanding that “conversational narratives realize an essential function of narrative: a vernacular, interactional forum for ordering, explaining, and otherwise taking a position on experience” (Ochs & Capps, 2001, p. 57). Ochs and Capps (2001) see their dimensions as a way to interpret how individuals use story to make meaning of their lives.

From the aforementioned review, I conclude that within the various scholarly perspectives on narrative inquiry are central tenets—tenets that guide my utilization of narrative inquiry as a methodological approach and that guide my thinking about the students and their stories I examine in this dissertation study. The following tenets, which I will take up more fully in the dissertation study’s findings chapter, are central to narrative inquiry:
1. The work of stories/narratives is found in connection, in the back and forth between the particular and the general, the personal and the social (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), the specific and the universal (Maynes, et al., 2008). Story in research “moves our knowing from the abstract, propositional knowing of academic research to the intimacy of knowing as a human concerned about human conditions” (Pinnegar & Hamilton, 2011, p. 50).

2. Stories/narratives reveal occurrences as well as expectations (Frank, 2010). Stories often reveal the difference between what people thought would happen in comparison with what actually occurred (Bruner, 2002). Expectations are in and of themselves stories, which provide a frame for how we experience our lives. In schools, parents, teachers, peers and/or community members may set expectations based on a variety of factors (e.g., personal beliefs/values, past experiences, hopes and dreams, data/information, other stories, misunderstandings).

3. Individuals are always living their story forward. As they live their story forward, they are also looking back in order to reinterpret and reconstitute events and situate their meaning in the form of narratives (Freeman, 2010). Thus, events that take place in both the present and the future can influence how events from the past are perceived.

4. A story is never just a story (Frank, 2010). Stories, according to Maynes et al., (2008), are always historically, socially, and temporally situated.
In other words, stories reflect a certain time and place (stories are situated within, but travel across, temporal-spatial relations).

Although Bruner (2002) claims that stories are better for finding problems than answering questions, narrative inquiry does provide a framework to study experience, gather stories, and interpret stories contextually. The above tenets and dimensions of narrative inquiry attest to this point (see Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Hankins, 2003).

**Whose story?**

Ownership of stories is an ongoing tension at many different phases of the narrative inquiry data collection and writing process (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). If our work as educators comes with accountability and if “living, telling, retelling, and reliving mark the qualities of life” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 187), then narratives also come with responsibilities. Taub-Pervizpur (2009), for instance, notes that storytelling with young people comes with concerns (both obligations and restraints) regarding the ethical dissemination of stories once completed.

Like stories, it is not always clear where responsibilities begin and where they end. Narrative inquirers are implicated in the storying process and ultimately become part of a shared narrative with those involved (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Hankins, 2003). The stories elicited in this dissertation study were partly a function of who I am (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Hankins, 2003) as a listener, an educator, and a researcher who posed questions for participants to consider. Yet these identities are ones that I self-assigned, and for many of the student-participants, I was just another teacher, or perhaps simply ‘Ms. Staley’ with an unknown and undefined role within their classroom. And,
yet, these identifying labels were not absent of the other labels that define who I am: a white female in her mid thirties who, audibly so, is an individual with a dialect that does not resemble the dialects of those who attend school at (or live within the) Shady Grove community, or even the United States.

Furthermore, my position, personal identity, experiences, involvements, and perspectives serve as filters through which I sift data in the process of making meaning (Ely et al., 1997, p. 223). Collectively, they act as the lens through which I view and analyze student stories (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). As I share student stories throughout this dissertation study, I am aware that some stories are foregrounded while others are not. They do of course exist, buzzing quietly in the background, though anonymous on these pages. In analyzing and writing about the findings, a winnowing process was necessary for clarity (Ely et al., 1997), given that my overall intent was to relate “their [students’] truths as they see them” (Stout, 2002, p. 4). The stories remain theirs, but the elicitation and interpretation process mean the stories here are layered and presented through my gaze (Hankins, 2003).

Additionally, the stories in this work were also affected by the context in which they were elicited. All the stories were collected in interactions that took place in school spaces including: the classroom, the library, the cafeteria, hallways, and closets (or small storage rooms) throughout the school. Stories shared were partly a function of the location (where I met with students in the school) and what that allowed (openness because no one else was present, resistance because others were present, or interruption because of a ringing bell). For example, as I conducted an early morning interview in the school’s cafeteria with a student, I noticed an abrupt change in the student’s tone and
pace after a group of peers sat down at an adjacent table. Within seconds, the ease of the conversation vanished and the interview ended. Thus, the stories presented in this dissertation study are highly impacted by immediate temporal-spatial conditions. Nevertheless, my reliance on a narrative inquiry methodological approach to this dissertation study afforded me an opportunity to better understand that the stories students tell about their educational experiences and lived conditions are not my stories. These stories are their stories (Adichie, 2007), and yet their stories can (and should) move and affect others. As Frank (2010) tells us, student storytelling enables stories to live and move amongst us, which is important because “after stories animate, they instigate” (p.3).

**Situating the narrative inquirer.**

Narrative inquiry is a first person endeavor, with narrative work often appearing autobiographical (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Clandinin and Connelly (2000) suggest this is because researchers ask questions and study topics that are born from their own experiences, which then shape the lines of inquiry they pursue and the way the research is interpreted. Researchers bring with them a range of experiences that influence the patterns they identify from their data (Eppley & Corbett, 2012), given that “we are educated into ways of seeing which condition our values” (Clough, 2002, p. 90). Furthermore, narrative inquirers are always reflecting back on themselves as they study and explore the lives and stories of their participants, thus “we become visible with our own lived and told stories” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, pp. 61-62).

All research has an agenda (Bruner, 2002; Ely et al., 1997). Clough (2002) claims, “we think in stories, and every researcher asks, consciously or otherwise, ‘What is the
story I wish to tell?” (p. 13). For every research article (in and of itself a story) that is published, there are as many stories that are not being told, not being shared, and, thus, not being published (Clough, 2002). Thus, researchers are never coming from an entirely objective position.

Given our subjective viewpoints and lived experiences, some truths (or ways of knowing) appear unavailable to us. Frank (2010) writes:

Stories’ most distinct and useful capacity to work with and on humans may be their openness to multiple understandings. People’s multiple interpretations make their stories available for multiple uses; or, people’s different responses to the same story reflect that story’s interpretive openness (p. 34).

The partiality of any knowing is inevitable. Thus, this dissertation study is framed by the questions I asked of the students (White high school students attending school in a rural Midwestern community in the United States) and that they asked of me (a White female researcher originally from Melbourne, Australia). Relatedly, this dissertation study is framed by how I come to interpret students’ stories through my own ideological, epistemological, and ontological ways of knowing. My interpretations of the collected stories presented in this dissertation, then, result from the roles I assumed in this study.

My role varied from time point to time point. At once I was an observer—sitting in the classroom noting the movements of the students and their interactions with texts, peers, and their teacher. I was also a participant—responding to questions from students about their literacy and multimodal assignments, and participating in classroom conversations. Additionally, I was always a researcher—questioning, documenting, coding, and then analyzing the movements, texts, comments, and classroom engagements
of students. With my varied roles (e.g., observer, participant, and researcher), it must be noted that I was at no point the classroom teacher and, thus, I was not responsible for grading student work. Undoubtedly, with my different roles, I was able to do what Frank (2010) suggests: notice, document, and collect students’ creation and interpretations of stories (their own and their peers’ stories) as I, myself, created a larger story about this work that has become, in fact, this dissertation study.

The Dissertation Study

This dissertation study, an examination of the stories created and exchanged by high school students, inquires into the following research questions:

- How do white, rural, non-college bound students at Shady Grove High School interrogate their educational experiences through specific narrative engagements (e.g., digital storytelling, conversational interviews, and obstacle papers)?
- As these students interrogate their experiences, how do they perceive facets of the education system to support or hinder their future (post-high school aspirations)?
- And finally, as these students consider their future aspirations, what do their educational experiences and narrative engagements reveal about systemic inequalities and/or opportunity at Shady Grove High School (and potentially other predominantly white, rural schools)?
To address these research questions, I draw on three sources of narrative products—students’ conversational interviews, obstacle papers\(^7\), and digital stories—which were collected during a semester long high school class called *Journey Beyond Shady Grove*. In the sections that follow, I describe the context for this dissertation study by focusing on the school, the local community, the class, the teacher, and the students. Then, I describe the research procedures for collecting and analyzing data, and for selecting the focal students featured in this dissertation study. Included in this discussion is a research timeline, which describes the length of time of the study.

**Context**

**The school and the principal at Shady Grove High School.**

This dissertation study takes place at a school I have named Shady Grove High School, a public school with 629 students in grades nine through twelve, and 33 fulltime teachers. The racial composite of the school is as follows: 98% of the students are White, 1% of the students are African American, and the remaining 1% of the students are classified as multiracial. Shady Grove High School has a state ranking of 247 out of 807 High Schools.\(^8\) Located in the Midwestern region of the United States, Shady Grove High School carries a rural-fringe designation, as assigned by the US Census bureau. The rural-fringe designation means that the school is located in a “territory that is less than or

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\(^7\) Obstacle papers described on page 101.

equal to 5 miles from an urbanized area, or a rural territory that is less than or equal to 2.5 miles from an urban cluster.”

The school’s current principal, Mr. Connect, was both a student and a teacher at Shady Grove High School, and his own father was the principal at the local elementary school for 27 years. Mr. Connect plays an active role in the community by maintaining a school blog and soliciting student opinions about the school. For example, he occasionally invites students to lunch to give him feedback on what the school administration is doing well and not so well, and asks for suggestions to improve school processes for students (field notes, June, 2012). Shady Grove High School is the only high school in the district, so the school population does not derive from a specific town center (there is no central town for the district, but there is a collection of small towns). Because the elementary, middle, and high schools were all constructed in adjacent fields off a major roadway, the schools, according to Mr. Connect, have become the town’s social center.

The community: Shady Grove.

The Midwestern state where this research takes place has the fourth largest rural school enrollment in the United States, with 469,948 students attending schools in rural districts (Strange, Johnson, Showalter, & Klein, 2012). Though rural districts nationally spend less than $5000 per student per annum, and with “high transportation spending

relative to instructional spending,” the district in this dissertation study spends an average of $8614 per student (Ohio Department of Education, 2012). This is an interesting point, given that the district of Shady Grove is not large: the district occupies just over 100 square miles and has a local population of 10,243 people. More specifically, Shady Grove High School is located approximately 50 miles from the State capital; however, the school is only 7 miles from Jonestown, the county seat, which has a population of 48,000 and which is home to Jonestown High School—a school whose enrollment exceeds 1400 students.

Shady Grove High School and Jonestown High School are eight miles apart and in different districts. According to the classroom teacher and principal at Shady Grove, students do transfer between the two schools with some frequency (field notes, September 27, 2012). One of the students who participated in this dissertation study during its beginning stages transferred to the other high school in the first month, and at least one student participating in the study reported having attended the other high school at some point in his education. According to Mr. Connect, the students at Shady Grove neither relate to nor associate with the students in the other school. Yet many of the senior level students art Shady Grove reported to me that they do have friends at the other school (field notes, September 2012).

The students in this study report that the Friday night football game is the major event of the week, but they spend time in the neighboring town on the weekends to go to the mall, restaurants, and the movies. There is another small town approximately 11 miles from the high school that the students say has two restaurants, including a pizza place that they sometimes visit (field notes, September 2012).
The course: Journey Beyond Shady Grove.

With the approval of Mr. Connect at Shady Grove High School and the Institutional Review Board at the university I attend, data collection for this dissertation study occurred between August 2012 and January 2013 in two sections of a senior year class called Journey Beyond Shady Grove. Shady Grove’s school board has deemed Journey Beyond Shady Grove a required course for High School graduation. It is designed as an alternative to the course, Journey to College, which prepares Shady Grove’s college-bound seniors for life in a university setting.

At Shady Grove, the school day starts with an opening bell at 7:25am and concludes with a bell that rings at 2:25pm, which is the end of the school’s 9th period. Each class period meets daily and is 41 minutes long. There are four-minute transitions between class periods, and often students pack up and start to amass by the door in the five minutes prior to the buzzer sounding. The two class sections from which data derived for this dissertation study met daily during periods seven and eight.

The course syllabus for Journey Beyond Shady Grove noted that there would be visits by various military recruiters, discussions on how to create life maps, as well as focused class time on creating a resume and an online job search portfolio on Monster.com. The classroom teacher, Ms. Lane, feels that one of her primary purposes in teaching this class is to ensure that students have the skills they need to be successful in their non-college bound lives post-high school graduation (field notes, August 27, 2012).

It should be noted that 48% of the students at Shady Grove do not go on to four year colleges, 7% of these students join the military, and the school is not sure what the remaining 41% of the students do post-graduation (principal meeting, field notes). One
day Ms. Lane described the class as “a class for students who don’t want a four year degree. It is not a class for students who don’t want to go to college because many of you do.” To which one of the males said, “I want a four year degree, actually” (field notes, September 25, 2012). As indicated in Tables 1 and 2, many of the students in the course report career plans that require further post high school education, and many have firm plans to go onto two-year programs, making the catchall “not college bound” inaccurate for many of the students, some who have applied for and been accepted into technical colleges.

**The teacher: Ms. Lane.**

*Journey Beyond Shady Grove* is a relatively new class, and this is the first year that Ms. Lane is teaching the course, at the request of the principal. As the newest member of the English department, Ms. Lane explained that it was not actually a request she could turn down; nevertheless, she was happy to teach the class (field notes, August 27, 2012). In her late twenties and having been a teacher for several years, Ms. Lane came to Shady Grove because she reported that she liked the administration. Throughout this dissertation study, Ms. Lane and I had many conversations about grading, issues of technology in the classroom, and engaging students in learning and language.

**The students.**

In period 7, there were 13 males and 11 females. One of the males who planned to go into the military left the school in October (three months into this study). Of the 23
remaining students, 21 of them were Caucasian, one of them was African American, and one of the students identified as being of Asian heritage. Eleven\textsuperscript{10} students from this class period consented to participate in the study: Nine of them were 18 years old and two were 19 years old (see Table 1).

In period 8, there were 17 males and eight females. It was reported by the school’s administration that two of the students transferred to Jonestown High School just before October. Of the 23 students remaining in this class period, 22 of them were Caucasian, and one of them was African American. Fourteen students from this class period consented to participate in the study: Nine of them were 18 years old and five were 17 years old (see Table 2). My focal students were coincidentally all drawn from this class period.

The student names reported in tables 1 and 2 are pseudonyms. Students were given the opportunity to select their own pseudonyms, but for those who did not do so, pseudonyms were assigned. The students’ desired professions are noted in parentheses.

\textsuperscript{10} One additional student from this class consented to participate in the study. However, he joined the class later in the semester and I received no classwork from him. He was attending class only sporadically when I was meeting students for interviews, and I have no additional information about him other than that provided on the consent. Therefore he has not been included in the data analysis.
Only the students who are highlighted in blue consented to share their work and stories. Gray boxes indicate empty desks.

The students in *Journey Beyond Shady Grove* have been described by staff as “unmotivated, low functioning sometimes for reasons they can’t control or we don’t even know about” with “major behavior issues” (field notes, September 4, 2012). Many of the students at the school are on Individualized Education Plans, and many of the seniors in the *Journey Beyond Shady Grove* classes received tutoring and other support services. However, as I will discuss in subsequent chapters, the stories of the participating students in this dissertation study tell a different story of who they are and how they see themselves.
### Table 1: Period 7

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Back of the classroom (windows)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Ben – 18, male**
  (engineer, professional hunter) | **Kyle – 18, male** | **Female**
  (Nurse) | **JR – 19 male**
  (auto business with his dad) | **Teacher’s desk** |
| **Jon – 18, male**
  (Nurse) | **Kristy – 18, female**
  (Firefighter) | **Male**
  (Navy) | **Male** (music producer) | **Amber - 18, female**
  (Dancer, stewardess) | **Ginko – 18, male**
  ("green job") | **Christine – 18, female**
  (counselor) |
| **Female** (Ultrasound tech) | **Female** (medical tech) | **Female**
  (preK teacher) | **Female**
  (Don’t know) | **Female** (architect/vet) | **Male who left the county** |
| **Male** (Honda/welding) | **Male** (Marines) | **Female**
  (architect/vet) | **Male**
  (video game tester/business) | **Female**
  (medicine tech) | **Male**
  (business owner) |
| **Male** (electrician) | **Jeff – 18, male**
  (construction) | **Front of the classroom** |
| **Female** (Ultrasound tech) | **Female**
  (architect/vet) | **Male**
  (video game tester/business) | **Male** (PT) | **Female moved to neighboring high school** |
| **Female**
  (Ultrasound tech) | **Front of the classroom** |

### Table 2: Period 8

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Back of the classroom (windows)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Craig – 18, male**
  (policeman) | **Sam - 17**
  (journalist) | **Paul - 17, male**
  (nurse/computers) | **Male**
  (Don’t know) | **Teacher’s desk** |
| **Kevin - 18, male**
  (diesel mechanic) | **Male**
  (army) | **Robert – 17 male**
  (work with dad-real estate) | **Male** (Marines) | **Male**
  (work with dad-real estate) |
| **Alexa – 18, female**
  (sonogram) | **Greg -18, male**
  (Journeyman) | **Claire – 17, female**
  (Cosmetology) | **Susan – 18, female**
  (business/Criminal justice) | **Male**
  (PT) | **Female**
  (PT) |
| **Female** (PT) | **Female moved to neighboring high school** | **Male**
  (business owner) | **Male** (Avionic tech) | **Ted - 18, male**
  (Marines) | **Kelly – 18, female**
  (park ranger or vet tech) |
| **Male** (Marines) | **Male – 18**
  (Tatoo artist) | **Male**
  (Military) | **Male moved to neighboring high school** | **Helen – 17, female**
  (Radiology) | **Front of the classroom** |
| **Female - 18**
  Left during study | **Female - 18**
  Left during study | **Female - 18**
  Left during study | **Female - 18**
  Left during study | **Female - 18**
  Left during study | **Front of the classroom** |
**Research Procedures**

The research period for this project took place across the entire course of *Journey Beyond Shady Grove*. Because of the focus on lived experiences, a variety of data sources were used during this study. Data sources include: notes from classroom observations; notes from meetings with teachers, administrators and students; classroom syllabi; classroom handouts; notes from conversations with students both individually and in small groups; student resumes; and other class work assigned to students by Ms. Lane. However, the primary data analyzed in this dissertation study derive from the three sources of students’ narrative products, which I describe below.

**Data collection: Narrative products.**

The main sources of data for this study derive from the following: 1) Digital stories that were created by the students as a part of this course, 2) Conversational interviews between the students and the researcher which occurred after the digital storytelling assignments were complete, and 3) ‘Obstacle papers’ that students produced early in the semester.

**Digital stories.**

Because students are regarded as active agents in their own learning (Kinloch, 2010), and teaching and learning are regarded as socially situated activities that occur in a community of practice or culture (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Rogoff, 2003; Rogoff et al., 2007), part of this dissertation study focused on the ways students considered and engaged with their own stories of education to create a digital story. While I was a participant observer in the course, in October—with permission from Ms. Lane and the
administration—I worked with Ms. Lane to design a digital storytelling assignment that invited students to consider their own educational experiences and generate a three-to-five minute digital narrative.

Digital storytelling is a form of storytelling that simultaneously leverages voice, images, and texts to tell a story (Lambert, 2009; Ohler, 2010; Robin, 2008). Digital stories typically include a spoken narrative of three to five minutes in duration, but unlike a movie, the story is accompanied by a collection of still images that can support or juxtapose the auditory presentation.

Joe Lambert’s work and his creation of the Digital Storytelling Center—now housed at the University of Berkeley, California—is generally credited as being the impetus for the growth in digital storytelling over the last decade in the United States and globally (Lambert, 2009). Lambert and his colleagues developed a manual and a series of workshops, advising how to harness the proliferation of free and user-friendly technologies to simple digital pedagogy. Subsequently, digital storytelling has been used for a variety of purposes in public school classrooms (Baily, 2011; Ohler, 2008), universities (Fields & Diaz, 2008), health care (A. Gubrium, 2009), and community settings (Hull, 2003).

Digital stories, according to Opperman (2008), “give students a voice to articulate heterogeneous positions in interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary dimensions of cultural critique” (p. 185). They also provide students an opportunity to experience healing through storytelling (Baily, 2011) by encouraging students to become producers of their own narratives (Taub-Pervizpour, 2009) instead of consumers of the stories others create about them. Just as much as storytelling has personal benefits (e.g., it can help people to
heal), it also has specific educational benefits. Lowenthal (2009) argues that some of the educational benefits of digital storytelling include: increased student engagement, access to a broader more authentic audience, amplification of individual voices, the leveraging of multiple literacies, and the harnessing of student emotion (see also Opperman, 2008; Selfe & Selfe, 2008). Digital storytelling can also be used as a tool to provide students with opportunities to identify sociopolitical and community issues as they learn to communicate their concerns, fears, and hopes by producing potentially powerful stories that can impact self and others (see Hull, 2003; Lambert, 2009; Taub-Pervizpour, 2009).

Hull (2003) notes that one of the most significant aspects of using digital storytelling is the “distinctive contrasts to the primarily alphabetic texts and the forms of textual reasoning that predominate in schools and universities” (p.230) as well as business and government. Digital technologies offer the possibility for young people to use programs (e.g. iMovie, Windows Movie Maker, YouTube, Flickr) they may already be fluent in and serve as potentially powerful pedagogical tools in the classroom (Baily, 2011; Robin, 2008; Selfe & Selfe, 2008).

Digital storytelling was selected for this dissertation study because the method provides multiple opportunities for students to reflect forward and backward (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) about their school experiences and their future aspirations as they consider their *Life Beyond Shady Grove*. It also allows students to engage with technology, a current emphasis in the school and part of a skill set required for many jobs. Additionally, digital storytelling can help teachers and administrators understand students’ experiences through their stories (Wake, 2012) as they work to provide better academic programming to meet student needs.
Because the students’ digital stories are central to the other data sources (conversational interviews; obstacle papers) analyzed in this dissertation, it is essential that I discuss some issues related to digital storytelling as an educational tool. To begin, the access to technology can render digital storytelling prohibitive as a classroom activity. Although digital storytelling can be done in classrooms using individual stories but shared computers (in pairs for example), or in small groups (see Wake, 2012), the technology aspect is fairly time intensive, and limits the time individual students can work on their own narratives. Because Shady Grove has one-on-one computing, and students already possessed their own school laptops for use throughout the school day. Not having to share computers for assignments meant that digital storytelling became a viable project in the Journey Beyond Shady Grove course and the necessary software (e.g. Windows Movie maker) was loaded onto their laptops during class time.

Lowenthal (2009), reports another issue that can arise with digital storytelling interested is that students are more interested in the technology component of the project than creating a meaningful narrative. While I discuss this issue in some detail in Chapter 5, it is important to note here that this concern may arise more frequently when the digital storytelling that is implemented in classrooms is related to curricular content (as discussed in Robin, 2008), rather than personal experiences (as in Wake, 2012) in contrast with the original intent of the form (Lambert, 2009). Related to the issue of interest in technology is the issue of reproduction, particularly when students make use of copyrighted music and images in their projects. In the course at Shady Grove, we discussed the importance of using products that did not have copyrights, how to find those products through Creative Commons, and how to credit them appropriately in their
work, supporting student development as literate global citizens in technological communication environments (Selfe & Selfe, 2008).

Another issue limited to digital storytelling is the sheer amount of time a project can take, and digital story telling products need considerably more class time – and technology support from teachers - than other more traditional assignments (e.g., writing a paper; giving a speech). While digital storytelling provides students an opportunity to produce something tangible that is available for future sharing it also requires students to have sustained engagement with their story. Lambert (2009) notes that despite the brevity of this product it requires careful scripting in order to produce a tight, concise, and linear story. Students record their own voices reading the script, adding that recording to the storyboard. The process then requires focused manipulation of images alongside the text as well as the addition of sound to convey meaning (Lambert, 2009).

Although the Digital Storytelling center (Lambert, 2009) provides a framework for conducting digital storytelling workshops, Ms. Lane and I found it to be too difficult to replicate in a 41-minute/session classroom of 25 students. Thus, we modified the framework and set designated weeks for the students to complete project tasks. Students worked on the project daily during the six weeks of class time. After the first week of December, the class moved onto a new assignment and students had to finish their stories on their own time. The following timeline was developed with the classroom teacher based on her experiences with the student group to support them through the project and was adapted as needed throughout (see Table 3).
Table 3: Digital Storytelling Timeline

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Activity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Week 1</td>
<td>Introducing the project including the prompts for eliciting student stories (See Appendix 1). Movie Maker software was downloaded onto student netbooks. Students were asked to brainstorm, or outline their story.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Week 2</td>
<td>Students produced a typed 2-page double spaced narrative for their digital story in Word/Google Docs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Week 3</td>
<td>Digital Story examples were viewed. Class discussions about choosing images, the power of images and using creative commons to search for images. Students began to select images, some students who were finished with their script began to record their story.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Week 4</td>
<td>Movie Maker tutorial. Class discussions about using text/picture effects, picture transitions and selecting music. Jamendo, a site that has free and creative commons music was discussed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Week 5</td>
<td>Students working on their stories in Movie Maker.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Week 6</td>
<td>Wrap up, students begin to work on their Digital Story reflections.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Developing their stories.

In late October, students received the assignment sheet, and had one week to think about and develop their story on paper while we downloaded software on their computers. During these class periods, I talked with students individually and in small groups about their story ideas, shaping and extending them when needed. For example, several students wanted to write about their hobbies (e.g., their love of motor sports, hunting, fishing) and we discussed how these passions relate to school. I posed questions like: Do they relate to school? Should they? How might school reflect these passions? What would you do differently if you were designing the curriculum? These early conversations helped some students develop their seedling ideas.

Some stories revealed themselves quickly, and had been discussed prior to the
onset of the digital storytelling project. For example, one student who wants to be an author, a photographer, or a counselor, spoke passionately about “teachers pretending they actually know you when they know nothing about you” (field notes, September 13, 2012). Her narrative about education was eventually a story about her mother’s death and the superficial interactions with her teachers that ensued.

After establishing their story idea, students then moved their writing to a two page double spaced google/word document text. Ms. Lane felt that a specific page target would help some of the students develop their narrative a bit further. The lengths of the student’s stories ultimately varied between one and three pages, some single-spaced, some double-spaced, and in a range of font sizes. There were a couple of stories that concluded, and then started on a completely different trajectory (for example, about how terrible and expensive the cafeteria pizza is), and it read as an attempt to fill page space. For those students, when they read their story for their soundtrack we ended at the natural conclusion.

The students were working independently through the story writing process on their school laptop computers. At the beginning of some class periods, either Ms. Lane or I would show them a digital story example, give them some short directions, or engage them as a whole class. For the remainder of the class period they were working on their individual projects, usually with a lot of chatting and peer interaction (not necessarily related to the task at hand).

Initially, I spent time in the classroom helping students if needed. If students were doing other class work during Journey Beyond, I moved onto another student. If students were on Facebook or YouTube, then I would usually sit beside them and help them with
their next step on the project. Many of the students in this class appeared to have difficulty initiating their work at the beginning of each class. That is, once they opened Movie Maker, the Creative Commons search site, Jamendo or simply their Google docs the work started, albeit with ongoing Facebook messaging, or other social media. Many students seemed to need an actual prompt to get started.

*The recording process.*

Once students began wrapping up the written text portion of their digital story, I spent most class periods in the adjacent storage closet helping them voice record them directly into their computers. Students were given the option to read their text aloud onto their computers at home or read them aloud while I was present. The recording process appeared to be uncomfortable for many students. They seemed surprised by their own voices as they read their own work and some of the students commented on how that felt. Some students would make editorial changes with their grammar or say things like, “that doesn’t make sense.” This time together gave me an opportunity to hear their stories, to hear them read their work, to watch them respond to their own work, and to help them with editing, if needed.

*The movie making process.*

Once the stories were recorded, students began to place their selected images into Movie Maker to accompany their script. Students also began to experiment with transitions, the addition of music and other technological features. Students needed constant support with the technology from both the classroom teacher and myself. Most
days were spent helping them with minor technical issues or moving students along to the next stage of their work.

**Conversational interviews.**

As the school semester came to a close, I began to meet with the consented students to talk about their digital storytelling projects, the class, and to ask other questions about their educational experiences. Some of the questions that I asked students included\(^\text{11}\):

- Do you think school is important? Why? Why not?
- We are trying to understand how high schoolers feel about and experience high school. Can you describe a favorite high school moment.. what made it your favorite?
- Can you describe your worst high school moment.. what made it your worst?
- What do you plan to do when you leave high school?
- How do you think high school has prepared you for that?

I met with students either during the *Journey Beyond Shady Grove* class time or during their study hall period. We met in empty classrooms, a closet, the library, or in the hallway depending on space availability. Interviews were recorded on an iPad and later downloaded into Express Scribe for transcribing.

\(^{11}\) Please see Appendix 2 for the full question list.
Twenty student interviews were completed and 19 of those interviews were one-on-one interviews, while one of those interviews occurred with two students. Interviews lasted from 11 minutes to 37 minutes. The mean interview length was 20 minutes and the median length was 17 minutes. Once the interviews were conducted and transcribed, I categorized interview responses based on how students described their educational experiences at Shady Grove and the role the digital storytelling project had on how they came to see themselves in school and how they came to produce their stories about aspects of who they are and want to become. Students’ responses to the interview questions serve as important data by which to understand how white, rural high school students in this dissertation study interrogated their educational experiences (research question #1).

Obstacle papers.

The third main source of student data used for this dissertation study came from a set of papers, which I refer to as their ‘obstacle’ papers. This was an assignment Ms. Lane gave the students early in the semester. She asked them to write about an obstacle they had overcome in their lives and what they had learned from their experiences.

This entire collection of papers was remarkable in that they were rife with stories about coping with the death of loved ones, drug abuse in the family, physical abuse, suicidal ideation, parental separation and divorce, and other impactful events in the student’s lives. I collected a total of 26 obstacle papers (19 of these belonged to students who consented to be in the study) from the students across both periods of the course, and I paid attention to how they described and told a story about a major “obstacle” in their
lives. I noted moments in the papers when students both told the story of the obstacle and alluded to ways that the obstacle helped them to think deeply about who they are and what their educational experiences provided (or did not provide) them (research questions #1 and 2). I discuss these papers more in the following chapters.

Data Analysis

Which Stories?

An ongoing tension in narrative work is the question: Which story to tell and how to tell it (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000)? After listening to students talk, after transcribing the data, after writing about the students, and after thinking across all the students participants, I found myself returning to certain students, to see what they thought, what they said, how they answered particular questions, and how talked about certain topics. Given that a central argument throughout this dissertation study is that educational researchers and practitioners need to better understand who students are in order to address an array of curricular needs, a broad presentation of the students as a collective started to seem like a disservice to the individual storytellers themselves.

This dissertation study, then, uses what might best be described as a thematic analysis, which looks at narratives to talk about the themes and patterns that emerge across stories (Pinnegar & Hamilton, 2011) and across students. I use a thematic analysis in this study in order to answer the research questions: How do white, rural students at Shady Grove High School interrogate their educational experiences through specific narrative engagements (digital storytelling, conversational interviews, obstacle papers)?
As these same students consider their future aspirations, what do their current educational experiences and narrative engagements reveal about systemic inequities within Shady Grove High School?

As I read through the data, I noted key words and themes that arose, and I coded in a manner similar to that of a constant comparative method (Glaser & Straus, 1967). As I transcribed individual interviews, I created a Word document that I used to simultaneously make notes and comments about the students’ responses to questions, based on their words, but also on what I knew about the students from classroom interactions and other conversations we had over the course of the term. By reviewing and re-viewing students’ course assignments, digital stories, and other data, I noted themes that emerged from the various texts.

While there were many other themes that arose in the students’ narratives, three major themes constantly presented themselves: 1) Relational experiences that affect student’s engagement in and experiences with school; 2) Functional experiences that affect student’s engagement in and experience in school; and 3) Students’ perceptions about the relationship between high school and life beyond school. I discuss these themes below.

1. Relational experiences that affect student’s engagement in and experiences with school:

This category is based on internal reflections on events that have taken place outside school and often in relation to family, or inside school and in relation to social issues. This includes, for example, the loss of loved ones and bullying. Here, the students wrote personal accounts of experiences that occurred and that shaped them and their
involvement in schools. The key concept here was relationships—students sought to make sense of their relationships with friends, peers, teachers, and family members.

2. Functional experiences that affect students’ engagement and experience in school:

The second category is based on a reporting of events that took place outside school. This included hobbies, experiences with car racing, fixing up a truck with a father, and participating in sports. These narratives were predominantly about life experiences that shaped students’ reflection and engagement in school. The key concept here was function—students sought to make sense of their education in relation to the “usefulness” of the experience to their life and aspirations.

3. Students’ perceptions about the relationship between high school and life beyond:

This category of narratives is explicitly about college and/or students’ future plans. Students reflected on the ways high school and high school faculty prepared them for life beyond the high school walls.

Many stories fell into the initial two categories, which presents a gendered division of the ways experience impacts schooling. The narratives categorized as ‘relational experiences’ were mostly from female students, and their stories derived from the emotional/relational nature of the experiences they reported. The narratives categorized as ‘functional life experiences’ were largely from male students, and their stories derived from non-emotionally related activities or events that usually occurred outside school. In the analysis of the stories, the separation of relational and functional may seem an arbitrary divide. I have separated these categories to better explain the
stories the students are telling. The stories in each category do have similar traits and are not intended to be dichotomous in terms of either gender or the way they are labeled. In fact, they may be considered like overlapping circles in a Venn diagram.

After initially writing across students, it became notable that while the reader may have a deeper sense of the themes present in the data, they may not be able to keep track of all the voices. Given that a key point in this research is the need for educators to better understand students in order to deliver relevant and hopefully more efficacious pedagogies, remaining with broad themes rather than individual stories seemed antithetical to the intent of this work. Thus, I further narrowed down the data by selecting specific students.

**Which Students?**

With twenty-five consented students, there were at least that many narratives and directions this work could have taken. All the stories I collected throughout my time at Shady Grove inevitably inform this work, give me a greater understanding of what it was like to be a teenager or young adult in Shady Grove in 2013, and provide me with rich insights into the ways experience and schooling intersect.

Because of my interest in the way young people make sense of their educational experiences, I do not delve into the thematic categories that arose in my data analysis, as much as use data from a selected few students that answer my research questions. As a result, I have chosen to focus on the work of three specific students from the *Journey Beyond Shady Grove* course—Greg, Claire and Alexa - who will be introduced in the next chapter.
Selecting students.

Of the twenty-five consented students, two of them left Shady Grove High School before the completion of the school year, and three did not complete interviews with me. One of those students consented during my last day of the class at Shady Grove so there was no time to meet for an interview; the other two had stopped consistently attending the class by the end of the course when I was meeting with students for interviews.

In selecting students I reviewed their digital stories, conversational interviews, obstacle papers, and my fieldnotes about the course and all of the students. I wrote summary paragraphs about the information they had shared with me, and with my research questions in front of me, I focused on what the students said about their educational experiences in their digital stories, obstacle papers, and conversational interviews in relation to bigger themes of inequity in public schooling. Doing so allowed me to not only focus on the students’ narratives, but to begin to address my research questions, particularly the third one: As these white, rural, non-college bound, high school students consider their future aspirations, what do their educational experiences and narrative engagements reveal about systemic inequities within Shady Grove High School?

In the following chapters, I analyze findings from the dissertation study as I address the particulars of the three research questions. I begin by first introducing the three focal students—Greg, Claire and Alexa—and then I elucidate their insights into reflections about the educational experiences of, and systemic inequities experienced by white, rural, non-college bound students.
Chapter 4: Students Making Sense of Their Educational Experiences - Findings

If one believes, as Ochs and Capps (2001) do, that “personal narrative is ubiquitous” (p.1), then story flows through people’s everyday conversations and interactions. In the previous chapter (Chapter 3) of this dissertation study, I discuss the scholarship of narrative inquirers in order to claim that both the process and act of storytelling encourage students to demonstrate agency and to make meaning of who they are as they question who others are (Frank, 2010). Thus, the rich potential of stories and storytelling is revealed in the opportunity that is provided for students to narrate their own understandings of self and others in the world (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000). According to Bruner (2002), “to tell a story is to issue an invitation not to be as the story is, but to see the world as embodied in the story” (p. 25).

This dissertation study, framed by critical multiculturalism (theoretically) and narrative inquiry (methodologically), seeks to do just that—“tell a story” in a way that understands “the world as embodied in the story” (Bruner, 2002, p. 25). In doing this telling, then, the following three research questions guide this study:

- How do white, rural, non-college bound students - at Shady Grove High School - interrogate their educational experiences through specific narrative engagements (digital storytelling, conversational interviews, obstacle papers)?
• As these students interrogate their experiences, how do they perceive facets of the education system to support or hinder their future aspirations?

• As these students consider their future aspirations, what do their educational experiences and narrative engagements reveal about systemic inequities within Shady Grove High School (and potentially other predominately white, rural high schools)?

To address these questions, I focus on the stories students shared about their lives and educational experiences during their participation in the Journey Beyond Shady Grove course. The multiple sources collected throughout my time at the school—a digital storytelling project, essay writing assignments, classroom conversations, semi-structured interviews, peer exchanges, and other course work assigned by the teacher, Ms. Lane—reveal the myriad ways students were encouraged to reflect deeply on who they are (their lives/lived conditions), how they see themselves (in high school), and how they view their future aspirations (post-high school graduation). These sources also point to how students relied on narrative forms of engagement (e.g., creating digital storytelling projects, reflecting on self via conversational interviews, writing obstacle papers) to consider the factors that might hinder their full participation in formal educational settings and that might reinforce systemic inequity and oppression that negatively impact them.

In this chapter, I analyze data from three specific narrative engagements (e.g., obstacle papers, digital stories, conversational interviews) of three focal students—Greg, Claire, and Alexa, students who all held strong opinions about education and schooling.
Situated within the larger context of the *Journey Beyond Shady Grove* course, the narrative engagements of the focal students provide a fair representation of themes (as introduced by the teacher and the other students) that arose throughout the semester and across the entire data set. In my presentation of, and analysis of, data from the three focal students, I also reference other students in the course because their perspectives are instrumental in understanding the import of stories and storytelling for rural high school students in this specific context.

To begin, I introduce the focal students in detail and I offer data from my researcher journal as a way to describe my initial impressions of the students and what I learned about (and from) them throughout the semester. Then, I analyze and discuss thematic findings from their narrative engagements to understand their perspectives about self, school, and their future aspirations. Their stories, as I will discuss, have significant implications for how they want teachers to know them (see Kinloch, 2010; Lee, 2007) and help them succeed in school (see Michie, 2009; Ayers, Ladson-Billings, Michie, & Dee, 2008). Finally, I discuss the need for teachers and researchers to encourage students to engage in narrative work (e.g., stories, digital storytelling) in order for students to hopefully see connections between their lives and school curricula.
The Three Focal Students

Meeting Greg\textsuperscript{12}.

Greg is a stocky eighteen year-old male who was born in Jonestown and has spent his life in Shady Grove. Greg is one of five children and reported that the major milestones in his life revolved around hunting, cars, and dirt bikes. Greg had a few best friends at the school, but they were students in another section of the Journey Beyond Shady Grove course. An approachable student, Greg was rarely outspoken or noisy enough to garner Ms. Lane’s attention. However, there were times when Greg presented with a certain degree of sass. For instance, during one class session, Ms. Lane commented to Greg, “I want you to take this [digital storytelling scripts] seriously,” to which Greg replied, “I’m taking it serious. Are you taking me seriously?” (field notes, October 30, 2012). When asked to name one thing he wanted people to know about him, Greg answered, “I don’t do drama\textsuperscript{13}” (field notes, September 11, 2012). Additionally, when I asked Greg how other people would describe him he answered, “most people if I don’t know them think I’m well mannered” (field notes, September 11, 2012).

\[\text{12} \text{ The students were given an opportunity to select their own pseudonym. Because none of them made selections, I assigned them pseudonyms. I chose names for the students whose meanings reflected a perceived character trait. Greg means watchful, alert, and vigilant, Claire means illustrious, clear, and bright, and Alexa means defender.}\]

\[\text{13} \text{ Students appear to use the term “drama” broadly to indicate the social aspects of being at school and interacting with peers. It has a negative connotation of social attention that is both unwelcomed and unwanted. When asked to finish the sentence “High School is…” many students said “drama.” This appears to be a concept word that encapsulates a wide variety of meanings, but certainly bullying can nestle under this “drama” category.}\]
Early in the semester, Greg told me he wanted to move to Australia and work as a “journeyman”\textsuperscript{14}, which he described as someone who is suspended in the air from a helicopter and works on power lines in the rural outback. His desire to work in Australia, I eventually learned, was not borne from a deeply rooted interest to leave the Shady Grove community upon graduation, but from listening to his cousin talk about wanting to work as a journeyman in Australia (and they planned to go together). One day, Greg finally admitted, “I really want to spend my life dirt track racing. Or being a high performance mechanic. Need better classes in school to set me up for life” (field notes, October 23, 2012). By January Greg reported that he “had a couple of jobs lined up” (interview transcript), and although he referenced working as a technician of some sort, he was quite vague about the specifics of his jobs.

Throughout the course, Greg consistently wrote about his love of racing—he enjoyed being behind the wheel of a racecar and having memorable experiences at the racetrack. The more he talked about his enjoyment of racing and other extra-curricular activities in which he participated, the more he insisted that school is not useful because it does not provide “hands on” experiences (digital story script). Greg openly contrasts school (as something that he has to do) with extra-curricular activities (something that he chooses to do). Thus, school and the educational experiences he has had there are not practical for the type of life (to include his passions and hobbies) that Greg sees himself

\[\text{\textsuperscript{14} A journeyman is actually a generic term for a tradesman that has completed an apprenticeship but is not yet a master in their trade.}\]
having post-high school graduation. In the analysis of data sections, I will describe what I call Greg’s driving passion (car racing) and his waning interest (in school) as these relate to his future aspirations.

**Meeting Claire.**

Claire is a bright, friendly, and approachable eighteen year-old female who was born in Jonestown and grew up in the local community. Claire could be a poster child for the model teenager: she is attractive, smart, and frequently talks about the importance of family and friends. Claire has a partial scholarship to an 18-month Cosmetology Program in a neighboring town, and she will attend this program with one of her friends from Shady Grove. Claire talks about her interest in cosmetology, noting that “you do hair, you do nails, you do facials, you do like the spa stuff” (Interview transcript, 1/10/13).

Although she is interested in cosmetology and, hence, is enrolled in the *Journey Beyond Shady Grove* class, she is an outlier: she is a high academic performer, a critical thinker, and a strong college candidate. Given that just over 50% of Shady Grove seniors go onto four-year colleges while 5-7% enter the military and the remaining 42% engage in other pursuits (e.g., working in the family business; joining the workforce; etc. [see Greg]), one would assume that because of Claire’s high academic status at the school, she is invested in attending college. However, her post-high school graduation plans do not entail becoming a college student.

A relatively quiet student during class sessions, Claire is always on task and always completes her assigned work without any fuss. Her work hardly ever has any of the obvious mistakes (e.g., misspelled words, grammar errors, subject-verb agreement)
that earmark the work of some of the other students in the class. When asked to describe herself in three words, Claire said, “responsible,” “honest,” and “reliable.” When asked how others would describe her, Claire answered, “responsible, don’t take anything for granted” (field notes, September 11, 2012). These themes of responsibility and reliability are prevalent throughout Claire’s various narrative engagements.

Not only does Claire not take anything for granted, she also does not let opportunities pass her by. She is actively involved in activities and clubs at the school and she was selected as a senior leader. In fact, when I asked Claire to share with me some specific ways Shady Grove High School might be improved for students, she donned the attitude and confidence of a leader. She did not hesitate to say that the teachers and administrators “should care less about just scores [and] like more about building our personalities to be ready for the real world.” She wholeheartedly believes that the students at Shady Grove must “be more involved with the decisions that he [Mr. Connect] makes for us, like that pertain to us.”

In my description of Claire, it would be an omission to ignore the fact that her family is extremely important to her, a theme that resonates throughout her narratives. She talks about her three brothers attending Shady Grove and how some of her fondest memories include “my freshman and my sophomore year with my brother.” Generally, the career path Claire has chosen (to be a cosmetologist) and the connection between this path and her family’s profession—as opposed to the schools’ insistence that she could “do more” with her life by attending college—speaks volumes to how much she identified with her family (who they are, what they do, and where they choose to live). At some level, Claire probably believes that if she attends college, then she would be making
a choice that goes against the people she loves the most (family). In the analysis of data sections, I will discuss the aforementioned point in more detail as I talk about what Claire’s narratives reveal about her future aspirations.

**Meeting Alexa.**

Alexa is a relatively solemn eighteen year-old female who was also born in Jonestown and grew up in the surrounding community. In our interactions, Alexa demonstrated both a gravity and seriousness that were absent in many of her peers. From her Facebook posts and the way she talked about friends, Alexa seems to have a playful side that is completely eclipsed in her school going persona. I sensed that she often expects the worst from a situation and is ready to fight and win as needed. For example, Alexa neither ignores nor tolerates small comments that could be perceived as derogatory toward herself, her friends, or her family. She attacks her offenders with sharp words.

Alexa reported that her family is comprised of her grandmother, her two aunts, her mother, her two female cousins, and her sister. It was through written work that Alexa revealed the many difficult events that she had endured in her lifetime. As the oldest sibling in a family where both of her parents were absent—her father left first, followed by her mother—Alexa shouldered responsibility for her siblings and herself.

Confessing that “I’m smart, I stick to myself and I’m quiet,” Alexa did acknowledge the perceptions that other people had of her—“loud,” “obnoxious,” and “a push over.” When I think of Alexa, who is a student in the second section of Ms. Lane’s two classes, I imagine her sitting quietly at her desk at the edge of the room—sometimes
reading a novel—and in close proximity to her female peers who also intend to work in the health sciences.

Alexa worked at Walmart during her senior year from 4 pm to 1 am each evening for $8.35/hour; she completed her homework during her “lunch break.” During a conversation, she indicated that she had no time for the “drama” of high school, which I interpreted as both a literal and figurative statement, given her full-time work schedule. Alexa plans to attend the local community college after high school, and will apply to their Sonogram program. Although she had not yet applied for entry into the community college program (as of January 2013, with a May 2013 high school graduation date), she reported that she had scheduled an appointment to meet with someone at the college.

Alexa’s narrative was a relatively unique one for a student in the Journey Beyond Shady Grove course. She wrote about her future and about what school meant to her, consistently articulating the belief that through education would come salvation. She considered school to be a necessary evil that she was forced to endure in order to eventually become the person she wanted to be. The more Alexa talked with me, the more I noticed how much she viewed school as a way out of her current socio-economic situation (rather than a way out of the community in which she has grown up): “Ten years from now, I will wake up not caring about how much money I spend because I know all my bills will be paid with no problem” (life map assignment). Although Alexa reads as one of Carr and Keflas’ (2009) categorical “seekers,” she is very much a “stayer.” She talks of “getting away,” but the community college program she plans to attend is less than 10 miles away from Shady Grove High School.
Alexa’s narratives vacillate between revealing her past and considering her future. In fact, she reveals how her family plays a major role in the past difficulties she experienced as a youth and how her peers impact her present day realities as a high school student. I gather that there is both a sense of loneliness and a feeling of independence circulating around Alexa. In the analysis of data sections, I will discuss these points in more detail as I talk about what Alexa’s narratives reveal about the role of high school in the lives of rural youth.

Thematic Findings From Students’ Narrative Engagements

The three focal students and their narrative engagements all reveal strong opinions about education and the purpose of schooling on their future aspirations. In the following section, I present the data from each of the focal students by turning attention to insights gathered from their obstacle papers, digital stories, and conversational interviews. In my analysis, I consider the overall themes of their narratives as revealed through these specific assignments and engagements.

Greg: A driving passion and a waning interest.

Through Greg’s texts, I will demonstrate that his narratives involve two juxtaposed ideas, which I consider his ‘driving passion’ and his ‘waning interest’. His driving passion is literal: his temporal and intellectual investment in car racing is the predominant theme of his obstacle paper and digital story. His waning interest is revealed in his reported (dis)engagement with high school and in his interview and digital story. From this discussion, I will then highlight why a focus on his waning interests and
driving passions is important for educators who are interested in pursuing a curriculum of social justice in their classrooms.

**Obstacle paper.**

Greg’s interest in car racing is revealed in his one and a half page obstacle paper which is about his desire to work on cars and the success he has had as a member of a pit crew. There is a moral shaping (Ochs & Capps, 2001) to Greg’s telling of and reflecting on his experiences on the racetrack. He even titled his document overcomingadream. In Greg’s obstacle paper he writes about his strong desire to “be a dirt track driver,” to “work on cars,” and to “be in the pits…[to] talk to all the racers.” According to Greg, throughout his youth, “people kept telling me that I would never be a racer or even work on race cars but I have been proving them wrong since the age of 14.” When he turned 14 years old, Greg “started helping out a four-cylinder team,” and this experience allowed him to “work…on modified racecars” once he turned 15. Now, as a 17 years old, he spends most of his weekends “at the racetrack being a pit crew member for a dirt track late model driver.”

It is important to highlight from the above-quoted passages from Greg’s obstacle paper the phrase, “people kept telling me that I would never,” which, for me, sticks out like a sore thumb. Although Greg had to constantly prove himself in light of such

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15 Students submitted their work to Ms. Lane electronically and most of these documents were titled ‘Untitled document’ or ‘Untitled presentation’ which was presumably the default title when the documents were saved on student’s individual computers.
disparaging remarks, he remained committed to his driving passion. Later in his obstacle paper, Greg describes some of the milestones he has experienced on the pit crew and the learning that has taken place (and the rich knowledge gained) under the mentorship of a dirt track late model driver. He writes:

He [the driver] has taught me so many things about working on race cars, everything from tires to shocks to rebuilding motors and even about how a track looks to tell if it’s slick, tacky, dry and wet so I knew what tires to put on for that race.

What is notable about this paper is the level of detail Greg goes into about racing and the opportunities for learning about the sport afforded to him—“working on cars, everything.” Greg appears to like and respect the driver and sees him as “a good role model in my life”.

For Greg, the opportunities that he is being afforded to learn about racing and racecars are significant because racing has always been one of his dreams. He has poured a considerable amount of energy into realizing his dream and fulfilling his driving passion, a point that is evident in his claim, “I have proved a lot of people wrong with this dream because it is coming true... It has always been my dream to be behind the wheel of a race car just one time and here before too long I’ll be driving one every weekend.” Greg continues: “I cannot wait wait [sic]. What I have learned from this is to never underestimate someone because if they want it bad enough then they have to work for it and it will happen.” It is clear that Greg “never gave up. I gave it my best and (the driver) had seen some potential in me so he made me his pit crew member last year because I was a very hard worker and he knew I wanted to help out more than anything.”
Greg presents a clear argument about the challenge he has overcome—a challenge that he once considered to be an impossible dream—but a challenge that solidified his belief that he can “never give up” on fulfilling his passions. Undoubtedly, there is a high level of excitement present in his writing (“I cannot wait”). Greg’s excitement reiterates arguments made by some educational researchers (Kinloch, 2010; Nygreen, 2013) who believe that students must be provided opportunities to explore ideas that are both relevant and meaningful to them. While there are many who might devalue car racing as a reasonable career trajectory, Freire’s sentiment that the teachable mind follows the teachable heart (McLaren, 1999) is important here. As the passages from his obstacle paper reveal, his heart and mind are committed to car racing, a point that is further highlighted in his digital story.

**Digital story.**

In Greg’s digital story he reveals that he has enjoyed watching NASCAR racing with his dad and uncle since he was four years old, and reports on his first lived experience at the dirt track when five years old. He claims, “I loved everything about it, the fast cars, the dirt flying, and the smell of racing fuel. Ever since that night… all I ever wanted to do is to be a dirt track racer.” The more he revealed his passion for racing, the more it

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16 In contrast I well recall my first experience at a dirt track with my father and the resignation that this was something I would have to endure if I wanted to spend time with him.
became clear that he lacked enthusiasm for school and the educational process. In Greg’s
digital story script, he says:

> In all the years I’ve been in school, I have learned a lot of stuff, but really what
are the chances that we are going to use any of it unless we become teachers? I
think that going to school is a big waste of time because I plan on working and
racing dirt track race cars and I’ve been doing it for four years and I pit crew for
a guy that has raced for 16 years and he has said school never taught him
anything about it.

It is interesting that Greg sees a disconnect between the content that is taught in
school and its applicability to his life. He makes no apologies in stating his belief that
teachers are the ones who need to know the kinds of information being taught in high
school classes because they have to teach it to the next batch of students. Also notable is
that Greg does not consistently claim car racing as a career. At the beginning of this
dissertation study, he expressed his desire to become a journeyman (and by this, he
means someone who fixes electrical wires) in Australia. Nevertheless, his desire to be a
journeyman and his disdain for school were supplanted when he confessed the following
in his digital story:

> I am currently in one class that has helped me with dirt track cars and that is
agricultural power equipment. It has showed me about the working parts inside
the motor and the outside. I have known a lot of the stuff but the class has helped
me with a few things. I feel that school needs to have more hands on classes.

Here Greg concedes that school may have something worthwhile to teach him when he
says, “the class has helped me with a few things.” His use of the verb “show” in relation
to learning about the motor is also indicative of the nature of the learning he is requesting (i.e. “more hands on”). For many of the students, Greg included report a resistance to the “telling” that seems to characterize their experience with most teaching.

In Greg’s interview we were able to talk more specifically about school as seen in the following section.

Conversational Interview.

In Greg’s interview, he further reiterates the idea that school was a waste of time and that there are no apparent connections between the courses he has taken (and his general participation in school) and his driving passions (as these relate to his future aspirations). In his interview, Greg confesses his dislike for the required one-to-one computing time, the focus on academic majors, and the stronghold of the school’s administration who, if Greg had his way, would “let us learn what we want to learn, let us do what we want to do.” In talking about school, Greg reported that academically, “I’m pretty damn good at everything. Agricultural science. Ag class. I can work on motors.” Yet when asked about his weaknesses, he reported, “anything to do with math, social sciences, anything but Ag.” Greg, as well as many of his peers, insist that grades and school suspensions are not as important as the time devoted to hunting.

When asked what advice Greg would give to teachers to enhance students’ educational experiences, he responded, “quit doing book work and let us do like… umm…[long pause] what do you call them? … [some diversion, and then he finally responds with] hands on stuff.” For Greg, the favorite teachers reportedly “understand what we want to do, like what we want to learn [and do] not make us learn stuff we don't
want to.” Greg’s sentiments remind me of Mariana, a high school senior featured in Kinloch’s (2012) study of young people crossing boundaries in an English class and a local community. According to Mariana, “some teachers just go and give us textbooks as the work and they don’t do no work with you [students]. They don’t interact with you and you don’t learn nothing” (Kinloch, 2012, p.18) However for Mariana, a favorite teacher, to use Greg’s description, is a teacher “who interacts with you and makes the lessons fun and understands where you come from and the problems you face” (p.18). Clearly, there are countless young people who have a reaction to school that is similar to the ones expressed by both Greg and Mariana.

Let me also note here that Greg would be a good candidate for the local C-Tech, a technical program that draws students who have graduated from area high schools and provides them with hands on, trade-based learning experiences. Greg and some of his peers talked about C-Tech, how they had applied, and how they had been accepted but changed their minds because of a pending law suit filed against C-Tech. According to Greg, another problem with attending C-Tech had to do with the fact that “funding was way down so you didn’t get to do as much as you were supposed to in the classes.”

I draw this example from Greg’s interview to demonstrate that he is not an apathetic young person with little interest in his future career trajectory. He applied, was accepted to, and rejected C-Tech based on the information he had and its relation to the education he hoped to receive there.
*Greg’s narrative thread.*

Examination of insights from Greg’s obstacle paper, digital story, and conversational interview reveals an enduring passion for dirt car racing, a revelation that might appear highly stereotypical of most young, white teenage males in rural America. This image, however stereotypical it might appear, says a lot about his driving passions with racing just as much as it says a lot about his waning interests in/with school. Greg is a student who tolerates, but hardly sees the point of school. In fact, he indicates that his assessment of his four years of high school proves that it was a “waste of time.” However much this stereotype is framed and/or contested in educational literature and scholarly conversations about rural high school students (Carr & Kefalas, 2009; Schafft & Jackson, 2010), particularly with regards to white males, one thing that is clear is that there are far too many students like Greg who feel disconnected from schools and schooling.

Many of these students do not see themselves or their interests included in the very educational experiences that are supposed to prepare them for life after high school. This point comes through clearly in Greg’s narrative engagements, given that at the crux of Greg’s story, his *raison d’etre,* is his driving passion to work with and around cars. While this point might seem cursory, given that Greg’s driving passion does not align with much, if any, of the Common Core State Standards, it is important to highlight the extent to which he committed himself to learning about and pursuing his hobby as well as overcoming significant obstacles to spend every weekend on the race track.

As I focus on the education and educational opportunities afforded to white, rural youth, Greg’s narrative engagements expose several noteworthy points to consider. Firstly, the staff at the school described students in *Journey Beyond Shady Grove* as a
mixed bag of unmotivated students. Yet Greg’s commitment to and his investment in racing defy the definition of “unmotivated.” Greg is not merely a bystander who loves car racing; he is an active participant, receiving mentoring from a trained driver, who is spending time learning about cars, and who is enhancing his car racing skills and vocabulary.

Greg is not alone in the investment he makes to his driving passion. Greg’s peer, Ben, reports spending over $3000 of his own wages on attracting and feeding deer to get ready for the hunting season. According to Ben, “I am growing some of the biggest deer we have had on the farm in probably ten years” (obstacle paper). In addition to Ben is Kevin, another student at the school who repaired a broken truck that sat atop concrete blocks into a functioning, drivable vehicle. With assistance and mentoring he received from his father, Kevin was able to refurbish the truck and use it to complete his everyday tasks (digital story). These examples—from Ben’s obstacle paper and Kevin’s digital story—further prove the importance of non-school required, extra-curricular educational experiences in the lives of rural high school students.

**Claire: College versus family, education versus community.**

While Claire is a “good student,” she is not college bound. Her narratives revolved around high school and its relationship to college, a theme that was particularly dominant in her digital story. Another major theme in Claire’s narratives is her family, who might be considered the primary mediating variable for why Claire has chosen cosmetology as a career path. I have ordered the presentation of Claire’s assignments to describe her digital story first, followed by her obstacle paper, and finally her interview.
Digital story.

Claire’s digital story text is acerbic, and begins as such:

College. The “ideal” destination for Shady Grove students after high school. That’s where they want us all to go. College is the answer to all our questions: What should I do after high school? What career do I pursue? How do I pick my career? How do I get a good job? College is always the answer they say.

To get a better sense of Claire’s digital story, it is important to highlight that her story, according to a summary that she wrote, “portrays the way our education system pushes us to go to 4-year colleges and to pursue ‘prestigious’ careers. My video portrays my feelings of being looked down upon and scrutinized for my career choice.” On this point, Claire continues by pointing the finger at the school administration before ending with a reference to being confident with your driving passions. She asserts the following:

The actual prompt of my story would be more along the lines of how our administration tries to push us towards one option for life after high school… I want other high school students to watch this video and realize that no one can write their story for them. Your passion and your decision in what you spend your life doing is completely up to you. I want them to feel more confident in pursuing what they really want to do in life.

This idea of having dreams and passions that were being stymied by the school’s administrative officials was not a topic unique to only Claire. One of her peers, Paul, also wrote about how students are quickly programmed by adults—“when you first enter high school you are become preprogrammed like a robot to only worry about one thing:
college.” Similar to ideas expressed by Claire, Paul wrote, “the stress destroys most kids dreams,” and many students “ lose their sense of freedom, they become these mindless robots.” Both Claire and Paul were quite forceful in their choice of words and images as they communicated the pressure they felt with going to college and the criticism they received when they decided not to go. In lieu of going to college, Paul wrote about his possible music career while Claire wrote about her desire to be a cosmetologist.

One of the more poignant paragraphs in Claire’s digital story reports on her experience with the guidance office during her sophomore year of high school. She notes: “They were trying to persuade me onto ‘the path,’ the path of a 4-year college. When I told her [counselor] about my plan to go to school to be a licensed cosmetologist, she didn’t exactly approve.” In fact, Claire indicated that the counselor expressed her disapproval by remarking that if Claire had no desire to attend College, then she “should have gone to C-Tech.” Further along in her digital story, Claire reflected on this encounter and shared the following:

So there it was. The only option they wanted me to have. Her words were. “That’s fine ‘n’ all if that’s what you think you want to do… but with your grades and intelligence you need to have a college back-up plan.” Does that mean college bound students are supposed to have a technical back-up plan if it doesn’t work out for them? Nope, of course not. And does that mean that people who go to technical schools or licenses instead of degrees are less intelligent?

Claire goes on to say, “I don’t think she [the guidance counselor] understood how much these words affected me” and “her words still haunt me to this day.” The counselors words made Claire feel “discouraged, looked down upon, and beyond anything else:
scared.” She began to question herself, her driving passion, and her career choice post-high school graduation, and in her digital story, she realized the guidance counselor “honestly did not feel that I was making the right career choice for my life.” Which made Claire question “so was I?” as she thought deeply about the counselor’s words.

In one way, it might appear appropriate for the counselor to encourage Claire, a bright, intelligent high school student, to go to college as appropriate. However, Claire’s digital story reveals her feelings about the lack of support and encouragement she received from the counselor. Upon further analysis of collected data, I believe that Claire would have greatly appreciated if the counselor had initially supported her desire to be a cosmetologist to later – perhaps after building a relationship based on mutual respect and trust, and an attempt to understand all that Claire wants to become - suggest that Claire consider earning a college degree related, possibly, to business management.

Listening to Claire, her stated dream is actually to run her own business (like her father), but the business and being a cosmetologist seem conflated in Claire’s narrative. Possibly because her only experience with/ knowing about owning a business is her father’s, and his business is cosmetology. Claire sees this profession as a way to work and earn money while growing a business. By respecting cosmetology as a profession (and thus respecting Claire’s family), while encouraging her to further her education in ways that align with both her dream, and her family allegiance, the counselor may have helped Claire realize the possibilities of fulfilling her dreams more expansively (i.e. with options for the next steps).

Instead, Claire interpreted the counselor’s opinions as yet another instance of an adult positioning high school and college in conflict with Claire’s dreams and aspirations,
resulting in Claire questioning, “who was she to tell me what my passion in life is?”

Thus, it is important to consider the questions: Is this particular rural school, as well as others, working with the strengths, passions, and interests of students in ways that support them on their educational journeys? If so, then how? If not, then why?

Claire’s digital story returns me to Carr and Keflas (2009), who write about the rural brain drain that is facilitated by well-meaning educators. According to Carr and Keflas, educators select who they consider to be the brightest students and they encourage them to leave home in order to acquire higher education and the assumed benefits that come with it. Claire is a responsible, smart, and reliable student who has the rich potential to be an asset to the community in which she chooses to live and work, and in this way, her narrative begs the question: How do we encourage Claire to maximize her intellectual potential while pursuing her passion and remaining in her local, familial community? Claire is right when she questions, “Does that mean that people who go to technical schools or licenses instead of degrees are less intelligent?” Does it?

Additionally, the limited number of specific career opportunities that students are exposed to points to the ways in which their driving passions are not centered in their educational experiences (see also Finn, 2009, Galley, 2008; Johnson, Thompson, & Naugle, 2009; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002; Weis, 1990). Claire’s peers, Laura and Ben, for example do not want to attend college. Laura wants to be a stewardess and Ben wants to be a professional hunter; however, they are not readily encouraged to explore these possibilities within the contexts of their rural high school. Claire’s digital story, then, emphasized how she and many of her peers were not encouraged to think about what their aspirations and desires if those were not directly related to college.
**Obstacle paper.**

Claire’s obstacle paper highlights her relationship with her family. She writes about the death of her twenty-three year old cousin due to a car accident on a back road shortcut one-morning 18 months prior to the completion of this assignment. Claire reports that before her cousin’s death, that Claire, herself, had only had her license for two months. She feared that something could happen to her and cause her family pain. Claire reveals that, “not a day goes by when I don’t think about her [my cousin] or relive that time” as “it’s still in the back of my mind as I try to live my life without any more regrets.”

According to Ochs and Capps (2001), narrative recall allows the narrator, in this case Claire, to bring a sense of coherence and authenticity to the experience that rocked her family. The assigned obstacle paper, in many ways, forces and/or encourages students to tell their stories, to take a moral stance, and to reveal to an audience that something both happened and was addressed in ways that result in lessons learned. For Claire, the moral of the story is that life is short: “I try to be a better person and appreciate what I have because I know it can be taken from me at any time. I spend more time with my family.” She concludes her obstacle paper by writing, “I learned that life isn’t always fair and you have to make the best out of it while you can.”

Claire’s digital story positions her family (her father in particular) as an inspirational force, and a definition of success. Her obstacle paper reveals the extent to which her family, their experiences, and their responses to situations influence Claire’s meaning-making. In this paper, Claire not only reports the death of an extended family member, but interprets the loss through the context of her immediate family. When Claire
says, “I was a sophomore ... I had to overcome the constant fear of something happening …I had to become a confident driver again,” her struggle with driving, and fears about her own behaviors on the road, are due to concerns that she could cause her family more pain. Pain similar to that Claire had observed upon her cousin’s death.

In the same way that the long term dream of running her own business and the plan to become a cosmetologist are conflated in Claire’s narratives about her future, her family - her love, her involvement and her consideration of them - are intertwined with Claire’s stories about her past, present and future. I draw this point out of Claire’s texts because one of the concerns of rural scholarship is that schools “facilitate out-migration in part by shaping identities that willingly embrace departure” (Howley & Howley, 2010, p. 46). Claire in her digital story, resists the counselor’s attempts to change her course, and in her obstacle paper emphasizes the importance of her family in her life.

It should be noted that although Claire may have perceived the counselor’s advice in conflict with her family and place in the community, admittance to a 4-year college or finding increased work opportunities, does not necessarily mean a move from the community for Shady Grove students. Shady Grove district itself is within a commutable (60 minute drive) distance from the State capital, a sizable urban center with a variety of private and public colleges.

Conversational Interview.

As in Claire’s obstacle paper, family and community were major themes in her conversational interview and Claire spent a good proportion of her interview talking
about her brothers and how much she enjoyed her high school years when one of her brothers was also at Shady Grove High School.

Because Claire had met all her graduation requirements, she was actually finished with school in mid-January, which was at the conclusion of the semester that data for this dissertation study were collected. This interview occurred six days before she was finished with classes at Shady Grove. Between the end of the actual school year in June and the start of her cosmetology course in August, Claire planned to work in the salon and save money. She reported, “I’ll work there just as much as I do now, but I’ll also get another job.”

When asked about specific favorite and worst high school moments, Claire could not think of any, although she reported that she “really enjoyed prom and all that stuff.” Also, “being a senior leader that was a pretty big moment because we had to be interviewed and go through this process.” I pull out these moments, to illustrate the way that students reflect on their high school experiences. Few students reported moments of obvious significance. Rather than home football game wins, prom queen crownings, or being state champions on the debate team, the moments students recounted tended to be vague (e.g. “prom and all that stuff”) and fairly non-specific. Claire’s enjoyment of being a senior leader, appears to be related to the actual process, with the singling out and validation inherent in the interview and selection procedure (being made ‘special’), than the role of being senior leader. I return to this idea of high school moments in chapter 5.

Overall, Claire thinks high school is important but “I just think it should be more personalized.” Like Greg’s requests for relevant and hands-on learning experiences, the notion of personalized schooling arose in a number of the student’s narratives. In line
with this theme, Claire reported that she had a favorite teacher, and named him because “he cares more about your school work, you know, he'll actually get to know you.” Note that Claire implies teachers can and do get to know students through caring about their work. Claire then went on to say that the way we could make high school better for students is if educators, “care less about like just scores, like more about building our personalities to be ready for the real world” then repeating this notion by stating we could help students if we “focus on building their character more than just making them smarter.” Given that larger education discourses within government focus on increasing standardization of process and product, the conversations students are having are in notable opposition.

When asked how Claire thinks the community feels about her she reflected, “I think I’m a pretty good student, the teachers seem to like me most of the time. I’m in 4H and stuff, I do a lot in the community so..” and as the conversation about community continued noted, “I want to live here, so I don’t think I’ll ever leave.” Through these narrative engagements we see a student firmly grounded in her sense of place and desire to remain in Shady Grove.

**Claire’s narrative thread.**

Claire’s narrative thread was about family, belonging to a community, college and her unhappiness that administrative adults at Shady Grove High School continued to push her toward college despite the fact that she planned to attend the state school of cosmetology. Examination of insights from her narrative engagements—her obstacle paper, digital story, and conversational interview—showed that her career goals firmly
align with her family’s business. As Claire indicated, “I've always wanted to be successful and I've always wanted to follow in my family's footsteps. I envision myself just taking over the [family] business and that's about it.”

Important to note here is that Claire’s reporting of her guidance counselor’s attempts to discourage her from attending cosmetology school points to how many of the adults at the school ignored the expressed interests of students by focusing on college pathways. When Shady Grove’s alumni and superintendent came to speak to the Journey Beyond classes as a part of the curriculum (field notes, November 14, 2012), I noted that the superintendent’s central point to students in Journey Beyond (a non-college bound class) was that college was the best decision he had ever made. A former student at Shady Grove, he was now the district’s superintendent. In relation to the narratives shared by Claire, the superintendent—as with most of the adults at the school—de-emphasized driving passions and interests and favored college as the only option for students, despite the fact, this superintendent is and has clearly been following his own driving passions.

As the superintendent spoke about being abandoned as a child, being in foster care, being adopted, and wanting to go into the military but not being able to for medical reasons—he always returned to his focus on attending college. At one point, he asks, “Do you think you are prepared academically for college?” before answering his question with “I hope so, that’s the goal. That’s what we are trying to accomplish.”

As noted in Claire’s narrative engagements (as well as in those of many of her peers, including Paul), their ideas, desires, and passions for what they wanted to do upon graduation from high school was never addressed in their schooling experiences. Similar
to insights from focal student Greg as well as Ben and Kevin (referenced earlier in this chapter), Claire revealed an interest in which in attending cosmetology school in order to follow in the footsteps of family members, and much like Greg, she was also willing to devote the time and energy to it. This latter point leads me to ask: If these students are a part of the 42% of students at Shady Grove who do not attend college after graduating from high school, then how is the high school best serving them and addressing their needs?

In thinking about college, Claire’s criticism of high school as a college feeder that does not really prepare students for their futures, it seemed appropriate to include a selection of responses from students about their future aspirations. As I listened to students talk about their dreams, passions, and aspirations, I was struck by how uniform their responses were: “I want a home, and I want a family” and “I’d like to own my own home, have a nice car and be successful.” Although Claire’s vision of life in ten years (see figure 1) was just as vague and ambiguous in details as Greg’s vision (see figure 2.), it was interesting that she was clear about her desire to own her own business (see figure 3).

In 10 years...

- I want to be done with school
- Be successful in my career
- Be married
- A reliable person
- Content & optimistic about my life

Figure 1 - Claire
When asked whether or not high school was preparing her for her future, Claire responded, “not so much, it’s a skill. High school helps a lot of kids going to four-year colleges, doesn’t pertain to us really. Classes like this [Journey Beyond] do somewhat.” Both Claire and Alexa (the next focal student I highlight) use their digital stories and conversational interviews to discuss their ideas about what high school should and should not be in relation to college and life after high school.
Alexa: At the crux of past and future.

Alexa presented with an ‘overcoming’ narrative (Ware, 2001) which is described explicitly in her obstacle paper but appears also as a theme in her digital story and conversational interview. Alexa’s narrative engagements describe past experiences and her desire to get an education so she can have the future she wants. There is a determined quality to Alexa’s words about achieving her goals as well as a constant recognition of the hardships she has already endured early in life and as a high school student. In the following sections, I present data from Alexa’s obstacle paper, digital story, and conversational interview.

Obstacle paper.

Although Alexa introduces her obstacle paper with, “I have had many obstacles in my life over the past eight years, I don’t think I could possibly even fit all of them on one sheet of paper,” her obstacle paper is fundamentally about loss. Specifically, she focuses on the aftermath of her father’s departure from their family, which was eventually followed by her mother’s subsequent leaving. These events placed a ten-year-old Alexa in the care of her siblings. According to Alexa, these events sparked many difficult changes in her life, which continue to reverberate through the years. In her obstacle paper, Alexa powerfully writes, “After my dad left my mom decided she wanted a new start. She moved us up to Springfield [40 miles away]. It was the worst experience of my life.” Alexa then writes about how her mother was not acting or behaving as a mother, and instead, “She went out partying a lot and wouldn’t come home until really late.” Her mother’s actions had a negative impact on Alexa and her siblings. According to Alexa:
So me being the older one I had to take care of my five-year-old sister, my seven-year-old cousin, and two girls my mom babysat who were seven and two. I took on the role as mom for about a year, and then my mom didn’t come home. After a couple of days I had my grandmother come pick up my sister and cousin and I told the lady I babysat for that I couldn’t do it. After staying a week I ended up coming home to grandma when she later got custody of my younger sister and I.

In conversations with Ms. Lane about Alexa’s obstacle paper (and those of other students in the class), she admitted that when she had assigned the paper she had not expected students to reveal so much pain and hurt (field notes). Alexa’s paper, in particular, provided Ms. Lane with a glimpse into Alex’s past and an opportunity for Ms. Lane to better understand Alexa and the world that she inhabits.

All throughout her obstacle paper, Alexa reflects on her overall life experiences, to date, in order to situate herself in the present. She begins by talking about being “done looking back in the past,” as she seeks “to better my life and to achieve everything that I want in life.” As a child, she made herself a promise that she “wasn’t going to be like my mother and father. (Both dropouts. Dad dropped out in 8th and mom dropped out 9th). I was going to be the one to make something of themselves and I am taking all the steps need to do that with.” Then, she shares:

I have a full time job, a car, and my education. I’m not only doing this for myself, I am doing it to show a point that just because you grow up with a rough life does not mean you have to continue that pattern. I am officially closing the book on my past, and opening a new one to my future.
Here, Alexa is making sense of her experiences and articulating her perceived way forward in order to eventually have the kind of life she wants in the future. Quite noticeable for me is her reference to self-reliance (e.g. “I am taking all the steps need” and “I have a full time job”). Additionally, Alexa’s digital story, described below, further references her feelings about the events in her life and how she views education for her future.

**Digital story.**

Alexa’s digital story paints a fairly bleak picture of high school and the people within it. She begins it with, “High school life. It’s not all it’s cracked up to be. Halls are crowded, your friends find new friends and then you feel all alone.” This isolation is described further when Alexa admits to having always been surrounded by “the same people for six solid years,” although those same people have not “really take[n] the time to see who I really am...A broken girl that hasn’t figured everything out. The girl that channels all her anger into school because she wants a way out.”

In Alexa’s digital story script she takes a look back in order to tell her viewers that she is “the girl whose dad walked out, that girl that had to figure life out when her mother was going off the deep end, the girl that never knew how to be a kid.” This experience gave Alexa credence for her body of knowledge and insight insofar as what she wants and what is and is not important as she looks forward (beyond high school). At the same time, Alexa’s story is emotionally frank in that it communicates her feelings about the perceived importance of high school:
High school to me is a way out. I come to school everyday because I want to be somebody. My high school education is what determines if I can get into that expensive college everyone wants to go to. My education is what determines if I can gain higher ground, higher than everyone that thought I was going nowhere in life. My education is what’s going to prove if I can be somebody important.

While claiming the importance of high school, Alexa is simultaneously critical of her peers and other students (e.g. “people in my generation are stupid. Just plain stupid”). She reports that for many of the students “it’s not all about learning anymore, it’s about where you fit in.” She critiques the desire to be prom queen, the worrying about attire, and the halls “running with drugs, secrets, who’s hooking up with who, pregnancy.” Alexa explains that all of these things contributes to making “life harder,” being surrounded by students who are “living in the moment” and who “are here to have a good time” instead of preparing for life after high school. In fact, Alexa finds that “being around these kids that don’t want to do nothing and are being loud and disruptive, it’s hard being like one of seven kids in a class trying to do work and get a good grade.”

Alexa’s digital story places her in close alignment with the perspective of many of the teachers and administrators at the high school who emphasize the importance of education, particularly for admittance into college. Also in her digital story are Alexa’s suggestions for educators to: explicitly include more discipline; assign less group work because the burden of completing assignments in a timely fashion tends to fall on the student who cares about receiving a good grade. This point comes through quite clearly when Alexa concludes that “high school to me is not a cakewalk. I am here to get my education, and become someone. I am here to help me get away from the life I lived for.
eighteen years.” Then, she states, “I am here to further my education in college and become everything I ever wanted to be. I am here to get away!”

**Interview.**

Alexa’s interview reiterates the importance she places on high school. Unlike Greg and Claire, Alexa appears to view college and further formal education as the only way forward to attain the life to which she aspires. This point is evident in her claim, “without an education you are pretty much going to live off welfare and do nothing with your life. You need an education to be somebody and be successful.”

When asked if she thought she would be well prepared to leave high school, Alexa skirted the ‘academic readiness’ aspect of the question and responded stated that she is “so ready to leave,” before she said that she does not “want to be in this... high school now, they're making it worse than what it was when I was a Freshman.” In describing the school as “worse,” she explained, “with the computers, and changing the grading system and not having homework, and just having tests and stuff. I think that's pointless, that's not even high school.”

Although Alexa reported that there were many changes she did not like, she was unable to articulate the details of those changes. For example, there were a lot of rumors circulating about the way grading was changing. In my conversations with Ms. Lane about the discussions regarding grading changes among the teachers and administrators, it was clear that changes had not actually been implemented at the onset of my study at the school and interviews with the students. Therefore, I was curious to hear Alexa’s responses to my question, “how are they changing the grading?” To this question, she
admitted, “um, I don't,” before explaining that “Ms. V. [another teacher] was talking about it a little bit and somebody's doing a journalism article on it but all I know is that they're taking…” According to Alexa, the teachers are talking about “taking all the assignments off to where there is only going to be tests, there's not going to be no more quizzes, homework, nothing… So pretty much you're just sitting in a classroom.”

Alexa’s response paved the way for us to talk about changes and improvements that she would like to see at Shady Grove High School. I asked her a direct question: “What do you think we could do to make high school more interesting?” After a long pause she said, “I don’t know.” The following conversation ensued:

Bea: Is it possible? [to make school more interesting]
Alexa: Make it more entertaining
Bea: Entertaining?
Alexa: I guess
Bea: In what way?
Alexa: ‘Cause right now we just kind of sit there and stare at our computers and look at each other.

I decided to reframe the question by asking Alexa the following: “How do you think we could make high school better for today's students?” To this, she replied, “I feel like if they made us come in later, maybe like nine-ish and made us stay longer, that might help. I feel like people would be more awake and want to be here.”

Alexa and the other students across the study’s consented group offered suggestions that were rather limited in scope regarding changes the school administration could make to improve the high school for students. Many students, especially the focal
students in this dissertation study, had formed assumptions (based, in part, on their experiences) about what school was like and how the overall structure of school could/could not change. They sought opportunities to reconsider, reimagine, and reconceive how a school like Shady Grove could function differently. The idea to have a later start to the school day came up in a number of students’ narrative engagements; many felt that a later starting time for classes would potentially increase student interest and engagement. However, this idea would not be without protest, as other students like Greg were very much against a later start time as that would impact his participation in out-of-school activities.

Additional insights from my interview with Alexa point to other suggestions she made—which parallel some of the perspectives of her peers—about public schooling:

Alexa: Since they're running this whole high school like college thing, MAKE IT like a college.

Bea: What about people who aren't going to college though? See this is a criticism of other peers in our class, that you know, why is everything directed to send kids to college? How do we make it better for students who have no interest in going to college?

Alexa: I think that would be pointless though because at least you are still getting that education that you kind of need to further go on with life and [not] just stay stuck in your high school years.

Bea: So you think that it's right that high schools really are like… I think what I am hearing people say is that high school is serving as a college feeder, and you're saying, that's what it should do because that's the goal.
Alexa: Yeah, I mean yeah of course you want to push people to go to college because I mean you kind of need to, if you want to have the house that you want and the cars that you want and live the way that you want.

Alexa’s narrative thread.

Examination of insights from Alexa’s obstacle paper, digital story, and conversational interview reveals her belief that high school is a means to an end. Like Greg, she feels that high school is something to be endured, however unlike Greg she values what high school offers, that is, education as a way out of her current situation. Alexa’s desire for ‘success’ and the social or symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1989) that might come with such success is evident in all three sources of her narrative engagements. Alexa is determined to overcome her past and get on with the business of having better, successful days in her present and future.

Yet, she is enrolled in a class for ‘non college bound’ students, although she plans to attend an admission competitive medical tech program at community college and I should reiterate here that at the time of this study, she had yet to prepare and submit an application for admission to a community college for enrollment the following fall semester. As is obvious in the above shared segments from Alexa’s texts, she strongly believes that the overall purpose of high school is to all prepare students to attend college. Perhaps the role of high school educators in getting Alexa and students like her into post high school education – at this point in her schooling - might simply be supporting her application process.
As I focus here on the education and educational opportunities afforded to white, rural youth, Alexa’s narrative engagements reveal noteworthy points. Firstly, her attention to being prepared for college points to her desire to be successful (self defined as having a job and owning a house and car). Like the 10 year plans for Greg and Claire (figures 1 and 2), Alexa’s ambitions (see figure 4) were somewhat vague (e.g. “degree of some sort” and “I want to be remembered”) but much more focused about the work setting (e.g. “well liked and well known hospital”) and field (e.g. “in the sonogram field”). Alexa has a clear plan, in part driven by a desire for financial stability (e.g. “wake up not caring about.. money.. I know all my bills will be paid”).

10 YEARS FROM NOW I WILL...
- Be finished with college and have at least a degree of some sort.
- Be the successful woman I always told myself I would be.
- Have my dream job and be working in a well known and well liked hospital in the sonogram field.
- Wake up not caring about how much money I spend because I know all my bills will be paid with no problem.
- I want to be remembered.

Figure 4 - Alexa

Secondly Alexa’s narrative positions high school as a bridge or stepping-stone, which must be navigated to reach her desired future (e.g. “my education is what determines if I can gain higher ground, higher than everyone that thought I was going nowhere in life”). She also illustrates in her narratives that this is no easy journey, high school is a landscape where she experienced loneliness within the crowded halls, anger which she reportedly channeled back into school (and which probably accounts for her
countenance I described using the words “gravity” “serious” and “solemn”) and isolation despite her desire to be known and understood (e.g. “the girl that everyone looks past because I put a smile on my face”).

Thirdly, Alexa’s narratives are notable for her reported independence and feeling that she has to secure her future on her own. Further she explicitly states she wants a job and home before a husband and children, noting “I really dont want to live like how my parents did. I want to go above and beyond my whole family.” Yet, a struggle to get through school, academically as well as socially, might be disinterred from Alexa’s texts. She does not report a “best moment” only a worst. Alexa does not report a favorite teacher, only that “some of the teachers are mean and disrespectful” and that teachers should “discipline more.” Though Alexa’s drive might come from a desire to be successful and overcome her current situation, like Greg and Claire she in no way presents as a disinterested, disaffected or disengaged youth. Her initiation of the college process may have stalled, but there is a reported drive towards post high school education.

Greg, Claire, and Alexa: Emerging Lessons From Their Narrative Engagements

Analyzing the narrative engagements of Greg, Claire, and Alexa revealed the complex and complicated ways in which students in the Journey Beyond Shady Grove course reflected on who they are, how they see themselves, and how they view their future aspirations. It was clear that the three focal students felt strongly about the purpose of schooling insofar as their desires and driving passions post-high school graduation are concerned.
For instance, Greg’s narratives reveal his willingness to invest significant time, finances, and attention into out-of-school activities (race car driving). He gained a lot of practical skills about, and developed a critical eye for, racing. However, his out-of-school interests were neither cultivated nor recognized as an essential part of who he was inside school. Instead, his interests were quickly dismissed as “useless” and “irrelevant.” This reality speaks to the needs of knowing and understanding how students view themselves outside of school in order to potentially harness those energies inside of school, so that students can have success both in the informal learning experiences of their lives as well as the formal education experiences (e.g. classes) that often serve as a ticket to post high school education and ultimately better job prospects (a mechanical degree might serve a student like Greg well).

Similarly, Claire, who sat at the desk directly to Greg’s left, was also ambivalent about school and its usefulness and purpose in her life. Despite the disapproval of her school counselors, Claire was determined to not attend a traditional college and, instead, receive her cosmetology license in order to work in (and eventually take over) the family business. She described Shady Grove High School as a college feeder, and although she performed well, academically, in school, she had no desire to attend college. Insights from Claire’s narratives speak to the potential benefits of knowing and understanding what students want for their lives, so curricular opportunities, encouragement and pushing to excel can align (rather than conflict) with student’s aspirations.

In terms of Alexa, she sought success, believing that school was important for all students—for those who wanted to attend college and for those who considered college a waste of time. She was determined to overcome her past life difficulties and, in many
ways, felt as if educational success would help her to do just that. However, she had not yet applied for admittance to college at the time of this study and she was not able to fully communicate the reasons why she was registered in the *Beyond Shady Grove* course—a course for ‘non college bound’ students. Alexa’s narratives, then, point to knowing and understanding how students view themselves in relation to high school school is imperative in order to support them in where they need to go, and acquire the skills they need to acquire.

In fact, taken together their narratives provide a fair representation of the overall narrative themes that arose in *Journey Beyond Shady Grove* and relayed in chapter 3. Claire and Alexa both shared their reflections on schooling revealing the heavy influence of past and present experiences involving relationships with their family. For Claire and Alexa, they interpret the way they see themselves and what they need to do to be ‘successful’ in their future through the lens of their relations. To Claire, family is a supportive and nurturing construct. Claire seeks post high school education to be like her family, and continue to have the lived experiences similar to those she has already known. To Alexa, her family has forced her to grow up fast, so that she seeks education to be different from them. Alexa wants more from her lived experiences than that which she has known to date.

Greg shared his reflections on schooling revealing the heavy influence of functional life experiences (i.e. being on the race track). That is, out of school life experiences that affected how he interprets inside of school learning. For Greg views his future self, and his successful adult self, via a series of experiences where he is talented,
competent, skilled, passionate and knowledgeable. Adjectives he does not reportedly experience within the high school context.

For all three of these students, their narratives relate to both their current day selves and their future selves and touch on the journeys that they must take to get to one from the other. For Greg, formal education is seen as irrelevant. For Claire, college is unnecessary, though training for her trade is essential and something she is planning to pursue. For Alexa, college and a 2-year medical licensure is her selected route to get “become everything I ever wanted to be.”

Collectively, my analysis of data from the narrative engagements of Greg, Claire, and Alexa reveal the ways in which students are not fully encouraged to pursue their driving passions (e.g., racecar driving, cosmetology) as they participate in academic opportunities (e.g., preparing to attend college) As McDonough, Gildersleeve and Jarzky (2010) note “systems, institutions and individual organizations are not congruent with rural student’s specific concerns about money, lifestyle, or academic preparation” (p. 191) and they further argue that “education needs to take responsibility for serving rural communities without expecting them to conform or assimilate to dominant cultural practices” (p. 192).

Note that Alexa and Claire are actually talking about courses of a similar duration and are both technical skills training courses to attain State professional licenses. Alexa however positions hers as college (it is a community college), while Claire does not (it is a school of cosmetology). placing the burden on higher education institutions rather than high school preparation.
Insofar as the primary research questions for this dissertation study are concerned (which I talk more explicitly about in Chapter 5), I believe that it is important for all students, and in this case, white, rural high school students, to be encouraged to consider the opportunities that can be afforded to them through schooling. Simultaneously, it is essential that those educational opportunities are not presented in opposition to their out-of-school, familial, extra-curricular interests and driving passions. There are ways for schools to be viewed by students as meaningful, relevant educational sites that can positively capitalize on (and not deflate or flatten) student interests. Educators—to include teachers, teacher researchers, and school administrators—should reflect on how meaning is assigned to activities (that get labeled as academic and/or social activities) by re-evaluating the goals and purposes of education for students like Greg, Claire, Alexa, and their peers.

In the following and final chapter of my dissertation, I return to my original research questions and the theoretical and methodological underpinnings of this study to highlight the themes that emerged from the narrative engagements of the three focal students. As I place additional attention on the importance of understanding what these narrative engagements reveal about students at Shady Grove, I also discuss the need for teachers and researchers to encourage students to engage in narrative work in order for students to hopefully see connections between their lives/interests and school curricula. Finally, I discuss implications of this work for future research and praxis concerning the lives and educational opportunities afforded to white, rural high school students.
Chapter 5: Journeying Beyond Shady Grove – Discussion and Conclusions

The intent of this dissertation was to analyze the narrative engagements of three white, rural, non-college bound students as these engagements relate to their high school experiences and access to equitable education. To do this, I listened to students, participated in their classrooms, and noted how they came to create stories that, I argue, interrogated assumptions about who they are, who they should be, and who they want to be during high school and after high school graduation. In this way, the data presented in Chapter 4 reveal that students position high school in various ways and for various purposes (e.g. Alexa’s position of high school as a stepping stone or bridge to the future she wants). College—or the acquirement of additional education after high school graduation—also features prominently in their narratives, even if they do not intend to go to college themselves. Because these students are seniors who don the label, ‘non-college bound’ students, their teachers and counselors constantly ask them about their futures, which leads me to wonder: What is being limited or omitted when the primary focus is placed on college as the “the answer to all our [students] questions” (Claire, digital story script)? The narrative engagements of Greg, Claire, and Alexa provide insight into how students view high school and the educational experiences that they have and/or have not been afforded.

In this final chapter, I return to my original research questions: *How do white, rural students at Shady Grove High School interrogate their educational experiences*
through specific narrative engagements (digital storytelling, conversational interviews, obstacle papers)? As these students interrogate their experiences, how do they perceive facets of the education system to support or hinder their future aspirations? And finally, as these students consider their future aspirations, what do their educational experiences and narrative engagements reveal about systemic inequalities and/or opportunity within Shady Grove High School and perhaps other predominantly white, rural schools? As part of my discussion in this chapter, I address each of these questions as a way to query how white rural students are positioned in schools, and as a way to consider whether there are more equitable ways to support students who seek to remain in their local community and not attend college after high school graduation.

Important to reiterate is that 42% of the students graduating from Shady Grove High School neither attend college nor enter the military. This is a significant number of students who, according to the narratives of current non-college bound seniors, might be better served if the focus of high school was not solely on college admittance and attendance. However, I do not focus here on a discussion of the ways teachers and administrators can increase student participation in high school and enhance their motivation to attend college. Instead, I emphasize the important role of narrative
inquiry—storytelling and the creation, production, and sharing of stories— as a tangible way to link what students do in high school with their passions and future aspirations

By addressing each research question, I am able to focus on the lessons that emerged from my analysis of students’ narrative engagements. From there, I address how my findings connect with my theoretical framing, literature review, and methodology. This leads me to present the implications and limitations of my research as well as explain the significance of my work to my three focal participants (e.g., Greg, Claire, and Alexa) and to me. Finally, I offer recommendations for future research involving storytelling and rural high school students.

Discussion

Research Question 1:

How do white, rural, non-college bound students at Shady Grove High School interrogate their educational experiences through narrative engagements (digital storytelling, conversational interviews, obstacle papers)?

- High school is cast as a ‘thing’ (an object) that students’ experience; it is positioned in various ways in their narratives.

19 Though engagement with narrative based pedagogies may in fact increase student participation and motivation (e.g. Corbett, 2013b; Wake, 2012).
• Despite their own thinking about education, students believe they experience high school as a result of decisions (including seemingly arbitrary rules, punishments) that are made by others with limited student input; those decisions may or may not benefit students and their educational experiences.

• High school is experienced in small moments (positive and negative) that strongly determine students’ overall perception of their high school experiences.

• Students’ view education broadly as a process that unfolds via the relationships it entails (e.g., mainly teacher and peer).

High school as a thing or an object.

Through the students’ narratives, it becomes evident that high school is viewed most often as a conglomerate, a whole, an object, rather than a sum of all its parts. Students tend to talk about high school as a single entity that is representative of the teachers, the curriculum, and the whole institutional structure. Early in the semester, I created a digital story example using the students’ responses to the prompt, “high school is…” (see http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ELgYoOnZuVk). The most common response was “boring,” but the adjectives ranged from describing it as a nuisance (e.g. annoying, lame, tiring, not for me) to difficult (e.g. overwhelming, challenging, hard, too high tech) to positive (e.g. cool, fun, great, exciting, awesome) and useful (e.g. helpful, getting you prepared for the real world). These single word descriptions may not guide us in thinking about high school and students’ perception of their educational experiences, but they certainly give a sense of the range of sentiments around the subject.
Insofar as Greg, Claire, and Alexa are concerned, high school serves different roles, a point that is evident in the narratives they produced about their educational experiences. For Greg, high school is used as a contrasting force to the things he wants to be doing and the things he is passionate about. Greg believes that there is real life and then there is high school; he believes high school is “a waste of time” and something to be endured.

For Claire, a “good student” who gets good grades, who is a senior leader, and who is liked by her teachers, high school has been both a positive experience and a wedge in her educational trajectory. She views high school as an experience that was ultimately critical of what she wants to do with her life and critical by proxy of her family and their occupation, deeming them not good enough. For Claire, high school is situated in the conflict between college and family, between leaving and staying. In this way, then, high school and college speak the same language—that of leaving behind family and home.

On the other hand, Alexa views high school much more positively than both Greg and Claire. Although she did not particularly like high school, she still viewed it as an opportunity or, to say it another way, as a stepping-stone and a bridge that can help her transition away from her past and into her future. Alexa as well as Greg and Claire, viewed high school as a singular entity that was either a waste of time or an opportunity for future aspirations to get named.

Collectively, their views—as told through the narratives they shared—can help educators (e.g., teachers, administrators, and researchers) to better understand who rural students are and what their desires are for their futures. If, like Alexa, educators view
high school as a stepping-stone that only leads to college, then what is the purpose of high school for non-college bound seniors? Findings from the narrative engagements of the focal students reveal that perhaps high school should be repositioned as a place that is not only a pipeline into college, but also as a place where students grapple with lived conditions, assert agency, and question who they are and what they want to be or become in the world. In this way, school might become more than simply a thing or an object.

**High school unfolds in the course of administrative decisions.**

In addition to viewing high school as a conglomerate, or an object, the data also reveal that students desired opportunities to participate in decisions that adults at the school were making. They wanted to have a say in what they thought should and should not be happening in school as these things impacted their lives. For instance, although Greg professed a general disdain for high school and the decisions made there—“well the new grading system wouldn't motivate me”—he also implied that students should be involved in the decisions. This point comes through in his comment that there are “extremely smart people that can't take test” who should be consulted on alternative means for them to be evaluated. A large number of students also talked about their preference for “hands-on learning,” indicating a rudimentary awareness of pedagogy and how teaching and learning might take place in the classroom if students were consulted.

Across the students’ interviews, they reported on various decisions being made by teachers and school administrators and they made suggestions for how things could be handled differently. For example, recall Alexa’s suggestion that teachers should enact more discipline as well as Greg’s discussion that student “suspensions are useless, they’re
punishing us by taking [us] out of the learning environment. How are we supposed to learn stuff when they are taking us out of the school?” Although he asserted that suspending students from school is not a decision that he supports, he does confess that when he is suspended, he is able to focus on his driving passions—“deer hunting” and “turkey hunting.”

Focal students also admitted they (and their peers) watch the actions and behaviors of adults, and they hold these behaviors against the rules and expectations that are set for them. They get upset when adults, especially those who police student behaviors, are not held to the same standards set for students. All three focal students expressed a desire to be involved in the decision-making process, given that they have all heard stories from family and community members about the adolescent behaviors of their school leaders (when they, themselves, were in high school). At the same time, the focal students are aware that the excuse, “because I said so,” is not a viable adult response to student behaviors and actions.

For the school’s administration, involving students in decision-making processes may potentially slow their process down considerably. Shady Grove’s administrators, to their credit, are active in encouraging students and community members to participate in discussions about the school (e.g., students are now being invited to have lunch with the administration to share their thoughts about what is going on at the school). Nevertheless, the narrative engagements of Greg, Claire, and Alexa reveal that they do not feel included in the decisions that get made and that are enacted.
High school is experienced in moments.

For many of the students, school is lived in moments and not in years. A good or bad moment can ricochet through a student’s day/week/month/year. What adults might consider small incidences, such as a humiliation, a fight in the corridor, being told off, or receiving praise can feel like larger moments for students at the school. When I asked students about their best and worst moments in high school, Claire shared her enjoyment about prom and being selected senior leader, Alexa shared her embarrassment being ‘depantsed’\(^{20}\) in the hallway, while Greg and his friend told an elaborate story of getting suspended for having candy during a lockdown.

From listening to and analyzing the narratives of Greg, Claire, Alexa, and their peers it became obvious that the Journey Beyond Shady Grove students experienced both positive and negative moments during their high school careers. For example, a positive moment could involve being included in something such as a school dance. A negative moment could include falling on the stairwell between classes, which is reported as the height of embarrassment, or fumbling a ball during a big game. Small incidents and events, which educators may be tempted to ignore as unimportant, mark students’ lives, particularly given the technology students now have at their disposal which allows for the swift capturing and sharing of discomfiture (Wiseman, 2009). The narrative engagements of the students in this dissertation study highlighted their belief that adults at the school

\[^{20}\text{“I had on, they kind of were like sweatpants… I forget who did it but I was walking down the hallway and all of a sudden I just lost my pants right in the middle of a school, like a bell change”}\]
too easily neglect the moments of connections with students. These students indicated that educators downplay their moments both negative and positive.

This is important because while school based adults might not be able to prevent negative moments from occurring in the lives of young people, they do have some control over the creation of positive moments (good moments were particularly salient in student stories when the positive moment violated expectations, that is, when something good occurred when they expected something bad to happen). Recall, in chapter 2, the work of Irvin, Meece, Byun, Farmer, and Hutchins (2011), which found that there is a positive relationship between students’ subjective outcomes in their school experiences and their educational achievement and aspirations. The intentional creation of positive moments in classrooms may serve as more than a feel good gesture.

Creating positive moments has the potential to connect students with their teachers, schools and learning environment, which makes them more likely to succeed in that context. As Noddings (2005) writes, “students will do things for people they like and trust” (p. 36). Further, “kids learn in communion. They listen to people who matter to them and to whom they matter” (p. 36). This point was evidenced exactly in Greg’s discussion about his relationship with the racing car driver when he stated, “he [the driver] has taught me so many things” and “he has been a good role model in my life”.

Additionally, the data point to how students recount, control, fight for, and appreciate the small things (e.g., a word of appreciation, being asked their opinions, fun activities, receiving breaks from the everydayness of school). While some educators might think across the years, oftentimes students experience school in the bright and dark moments that happen weekly, if not daily. In this way, high school—for Greg, Claire, and
Alex—is experienced in small moments that strongly impact their overall perception of their high school experiences.

**Learning is experienced through relationships.**

Teaching is not enough. Students want to be seen, known, and understood. Students in this dissertation study reported that they learned because of the relationships they had with teachers with whom they were comfortable talking. This is as Noddings (2005) says, “subject matter cannot carry itself. Relation, except in very rare cases, precedes any engagement with subject matter” (p. 36). The Shady Grove seniors in this study appeared to have at least one teacher that they could connect with, and when I asked them if they had a favorite teacher, as a group they listed a variety of teachers’ names (a point Shady Grove faculty might be proud of). As might be expected, there were a few teachers’ names that came up more frequently, and students described these educators as mentors, role models, and/or cheerleaders.

Individual teachers make a difference in students’ lives and when asked, students consistently talked about the teachers they can go to for assistance. Having a positive, supportive, and/or nurturing relationship with a teacher or another adult at school could serve a protective function for students. It could also increase the likelihood that students are more likely to be successful in school. This point leads me to pose the following questions: Can a systematically implemented pairing of students with teacher-mentors in schools work in a way that is valuable for teachers and students? Or does the teacher-mentor relationship by necessity need to grow from a relationship forged over commonality? Where in the day or across the curriculum could homeroom teachers
connect one on one with students as a way to support this idea of teacher-mentor? How might students be encouraged to select their own teacher-mentor, and how can this selection address their feelings about not being included in the decision-making processes at the school?

Alexa was one of few students who did not report having a favorite teacher (I forgot to ask the question in the meandering of our conversation). I wonder if Alexa had a teacher-mentor and if her journey through high school might have been smoother if she did have someone to help her navigate her educational process?

As discussed in Chapter 4, given the disconnect between students’ school experiences and their driving passions and future aspirations, school might not be a natural setting for some students to find a mentor. Greg, for instance, did not have an adult mentor at Shady Grove; instead, he had a professional racecar driver as his mentor. This reality was revealed in Greg’s narrative engagements and texts—a revelation that proves powerful in better understanding who Greg is, what his passions are, and how he is working to fulfill those passions. In this way, students’ narratives have the strong potential for educators to get to know students and form meaningful relationships with them as they also seek ways to meet their students’ academic needs.

**Research Question 2:**

As these students report on their experiences, how do they perceive facets of the education system to relate to support or hinder their future aspirations?

- These Shady Grove students do not really view high school in component parts. They view high school as a singular object (as described in question 1) and also as a “college feeder”.

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Further, these students report a tenuous link between high school content and their future aspirations. They report that they would like school to be “useful,” but they believed high school was not applicable to their aspirations.

**High school as a “college feeder.”**

Many of the students feel as if high school is nothing more than a feeder into college, and for the students in this study who did not want to attend college, they did not see their driving passions as central to any of the decisions being made at the school. This point speaks directly to my initial impressions of the *Journey Beyond Shady Grove* course. During my early visits to the school, I unfortunately framed the course as a “problem” insofar as students who registered for and, subsequently, completed this course identified as non-college bound. Admittedly, I entered into the course with the preconceived notion, to borrow Claire’s words, that “college is the ideal destination of Shady Grove students” (digital story).

During my analysis of data from the students’ narrative engagements, I realized that the aspirations of non-college bound students were not being met, and that this was a disadvantage. The focal students, in one way or another, all presented evidence that pointed to their desires to obtain a job, earn a good salary, and acquire a home. In this way, one could argue that the best way to prepare students to obtain these stated desires (especially during these times in which jobs are becoming increasingly scarce in rural areas) would be to ensure that they attain a college degree. However, the data from the students’ narrative engagements get me to question the importance of college for students who have already identified their desires and aspirations for their futures. The data also
help me to acknowledge students’ valid concerns about the cost of college and the potential burden of debt in a rather unstable job market. Equally important to consider are the alternatives for students who are do not want to attend college. Students like Greg force me to revisit the question, “What is the purpose of public schooling?” In revisiting this question, the data do reveal that these students—especially Greg, Claire, and their peers and, to some extent, Alexa—believe high school is a college feeder and not a place where students can learn foundational skills that are useful in everyday interactions and situations (e.g. simple arithmetic for balancing a check book, calculating change to receive from purchases, reading manuals and directions, etc.).

As Carr and Keflas (2009) found, those who leave rural areas often do not return. Once college educated, they find better job opportunities elsewhere. Because of these realities, Carr and Keflas (2009) suggest that communities put additional resources into students who do not want to leave because they are the ones who will stay and ensure the survival of rural communities. This is an important point, as it suggests a need to better account for who rural students are and what their driving passions, desires, and future aspirations are in ways that are both recognized and cultivated in school. One way for this recognition and cultivation to occur is if educators support rural students as they create, produce, and share their narratives—about school and schooling, about their dreams and passions, and about their lived conditions and future aspirations. In this way, students might not readily identify high school as a college feeder as much as they might view high school as place that encourages them to be reflexive, critical learners who are openly questioning what they want to do post-high school graduation. Focal and non-focal
students in my dissertation study overwhelmingly communicated that high school should be more useful to them.

**High school should be “useful.”**

For non-college bound students at Shady Grove High School, the relevance of high school and the materials being taught there were popular topics for discussion. Susan, one of Greg, Claire, and Alexa’s peers, shared in an interview that “they [teachers and administrators] push the higher up classes like college review and stuff like that but if I could push something to students it would be something they will need in life” (conversational interview). Another peer, Tim, shared an experience he had working with his father on a truck. Working on the truck taught him a lot “because it was all hands on. I’m not sure how you would make it [school] completely hands on but if it were more, then at least it would be a lot easier to learn for me” (digital story). Susan and Tim’s points align with Greg’s earlier sentiments (see Chapter 4) that school does not place value on the out-of-school and extra-curricular experiences in which many students are already engaging.

These are the experiences that some of the non-college bound students in the *Journey Beyond Shady Grove* course value and see themselves taking up in their futures. Hence, the perceived importance and usefulness of school varies from student to student. Whereas Alexa asserts, “my education is what is going to prove if I can be somebody important,” Greg believes that the education he is receiving at Shady Grove does not align with his future aspirations. If provided opportunities to explore ideas that are relevant and meaningful to him, then he might begin to see the connections. Dewey
(1938) wrote, “the only freedom that is of enduring importance is freedom of intelligence, that is to say, freedom of observation and of judgment exercised in behalf of purposes that are intrinsically worthwhile” (p. 61). Greg is echoing the sentiment of Dewey in his desire to focus his attention and energy on subject material and experiences that he finds “intrinsically worthwhile”. It should be noted that Greg is not alone in his ideas; many of his peers (who were non-focal students in this study) also believed that school should better align with students’ expressed interests and aspirations. The student’s narratives revealed an unfortunate truth that was also present in Nygreen’s (2013) research when she states “when one type of curriculum gets defined as high standards, any alternative to it gets defined as a lack of standards rather than an equally valuable if different set of knowledge and skills” (p. 154).

At the same time, it also needs to be noted that some of Greg’s peers had a similar reaction to school (e.g., as useful, as beneficial) as did Alexa. For example, a non-focal student, Carl, noted that high school “helps you learn responsibility so when you graduate you can get a job and you can support yourself” (digital story) another, Joe, stated “the good thing with school is that every person gets a good education” (digital story). Carl didn’t like school though (“I still think school sucks”), he reported he was only motivated to work at it so he could continue to play football. Joe thought, “the last 13 years sucked” but was willing to concede “I did get some education out of it.”

21 But as Willis (1977) shrewdly pointed out “the market economy of jobs in a capitalist society emphatically does not extend to a market economy of satisfactions” (p. 1).
Overall, all of the students—focal and non-focal students—agreed that school should be more useful to them, but in its current state, high school was not explicitly applicable to their current aspirations. Their perceptions point to the need for facets of the education system to better support and align with their imagined futures.

Hadre, Sullivan and Crowson (2009) found in their research, that:

the more rural students saw the usefulness and value of what they are learning in school, and saw it as contributing toward achieving their goals, the more likely they were to exhibit an interest in school, put forth effort, and exhibit intentions to graduate and go on to postsecondary opportunities (p.13).

That is, if students perceive school to be “useful” then they are also much more likely to do the very thing school personnel want from them. Like the research of Irvin et. al (2013), the significance of these findings is that perceptions of ‘usefulness’ are relatively malleable compared to other factors. Teachers and administrations can be explicit about the practical value of learning material, linking learning to interests and aspirations of their students.

Implications

Research Question 3:

As the Journey Beyond Shady Grove students consider their future aspirations, what do their educational experiences and narrative engagements reveal about systemic inequalities and/or opportunity within Shady Grove High School, a predominantly white, rural high school?
• Access to opportunities is a structural feature of public schooling. The students in this study report limited access to meaningful and “intrinsically worthwhile” (Dewey, 1938) career opportunities that align with their visions and interests.

• By setting college as the “ideal” post-high school destination (strictly defined as a four-year institution) works against, rather than for, these students who might attend technical schools and community colleges.

• The visionary move towards one-on-one computing is still divisive for the Shady Grove senior students at this stage of the program.

**Limited access to opportunities.**

The answers to research question two and research question three are intertwined, in that, the students in this study reported educational hindrances (high school as a college feeder, high school as irrelevant) that are in many ways a structural feature of educational access and opportunity at Shady Grove High School. For the narrative engagements of Greg, Claire, Alexa and their peers revealed that the most notable limitation non-college bound students at Shady Grove High School face, is a lack of opportunity for envisioning and working towards a variety of career aspirations.

I conclude that opportunities for imagining varied futures, and implementing steps towards those futures are narrow, in part due to the strong emphasis placed on college at

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22 I concede that it is well possible, that exposure to varied career opportunities existed in Middle School or early High School years, and that the students in *Journey Beyond Shady Grove* have long since forgotten those efforts made by administrators, guidance counselors and teachers.
the school, in part because students in rural communities may have limited awareness about the variety of professions that might match their interests, and in part because some professional trajectories are less valued than others (e.g. cosmetology, being a tattoo artist).

Considering Greg’s narrative responses (and that of his male peers), I reflect on Dewey (1938) when he wrote:

There is no point in the philosophy of progressive education which is sounder than its emphasis upon the importance of the participation of the learner in the formation of purposes which direct his activities in the learning process, just as there is no defect in the traditional education greater than its failure to secure the active co-operation of the pupil in construction of the purposes involved in his studying. (p. 67)

In thinking about both the “active co-operation of the pupil in construction of the purposes” and the “participation of the learner in the formation of purposes which direct his activities in the learning process” Greg’s stories serve as an exemplar for a situation where the school has failed to gain an effective collaboration with Greg in regards to his own learning process, and the window of opportunity for meeting Greg and genuinely reflecting on his aspirations in order to support his ongoing educational journey seems to have closed. For better or worse, Greg now looks to the racing car “driver” as “role model” and counsel.

By the time students were enrolled in Journey Beyond Shady Grove, the best efforts of Ms. Lane (e.g. creating resumes, setting up job seeker accounts on Monster.com) were still Band-Aid approaches to students who had come close to the end
of their high school careers, often without a link into the next educational opportunity (and I use this term broadly) as related to their career aspirations. Like Alexa, who had not applied nor met with the community college she planned to attend in the Fall, Amber reported little idea about the process of actually becoming an airline stewardess. Further, Kelly was not in touch with either a park ranger or a vet technician program, though these were consistently stated career goals. Relatedly, I suspect many applications from this cohort went unsent because students did not have money for the application fee.

Reportedly, in Journey to College students participated in activities like filling out college application forms, and completing a Federal application for Student Aid (FAFSA), however many of these ‘non college bound’ students needed to participate in these activities in order to get themselves into technical programs at community colleges. Which leads me to considering college as the ideal destination for Shady Grove students and how we are defining college.

**College as the ‘ideal’ destination.**

*Journey Beyond Shady Grove* is a board-mandated course, which was designed to meet the needs of Shady Grove’s non-college bound student population. It was, by all reports, a thoughtfully conceived course in an attempt to provide “useful” programming (such as was requested by students like Greg and his peers). On the flip side, enrollment in *Journey Beyond Shady Grove* tags Shady Grove seniors as ‘not college bound’ and yet there seemed to be some confusion about the college related ambitions of the students in the class. Recall, Ms. Lane’s comment that this is “a class for students who don’t want a four-year degree. It is not a class for students who don’t want to go to college because
many of you do.” To which one of the males said, “I want a four year degree, actually” (field notes, September 25, 2012). A review of Table 1 and Table 2 reveals that 21 of the 48 students in Journey Beyond Shady Grove report professional aspirations that require additional education (whether technical courses, community college, or a bachelor’s degree).

Thus by setting college as the ‘ideal’ post-high school destination may be less of an issue for these students than the simultaneous defining of college as “an independent institution of higher learning offering a course of general studies leading to a bachelor's degree;“23 a definition that works against, rather than for, students who might attend technical schools and community colleges. The Merriam-Webster dictionary offers a variety of definitions for college beyond the one given above, including “a school in the U.S. that you go to after high school” and “a school that offers courses leading to a degree (such as a bachelor's degree or an associate's degree)” or “an institution offering instruction usually in a professional, vocational, or technical field.” Perhaps, if the focus is to be on college for all, greater consideration should be placed on how college is defined, and how the discourse around college might be more inclusive. Having Journey Beyond students define ‘college’ and generate a group definition in the course may clarify the intent of the course for the student group, and provide an opening for considering their inclusion/exclusion from the ‘college for all’ rhetoric.

Further, Merriam-Webster reports that the word ‘college’ comes from the Latin *collegium*, which means *society*. If the definition of ‘college’ comes from the word society, perhaps another worthwhile class discussion might include the ways that students see their career aspirations as contributing to society, particularly in Shady Grove, this community that they are an intrinsic and valued part of. Perhaps, this defining and considering will begin the process of ‘naming,’ an essential step towards recognizing and acting on injustice (hooks, 1994; Nygreen, 2013) as well as sustaining their community.

In Nygreen’s (2013) work at Jackson High, like in my work at Shady Grove, there was a continued emphasis on the importance of college. Nygreen (2013) too writes of the challenges of “college for all” as a “ubiquitous public discourse” (p. 140). In Nygreen’s research with urban youth she found that there were two competing discourses in and around the student body, firstly working hard and striving for college, and secondly, drug sales. Nygreen (2013) writes that “the implicit framing of these two pathways as the exclusive options…obscures a third possible and likely pathway: direct entry into the blue-collar or retail-sector labor force” (p. 147). She notes that while this discussion is “largely absent” and it is “implicitly framed as an inferior path for those not smart enough for college or brave enough for the streets… direct entry into the labor force is the path that a majority of high school graduates take” (Nygreen, 2013, p. 147). Direct entry into the work is a reality that is likely in play for many non-college bound Shady Grove seniors, and certainly most of those in this research.

Alexa spoke briefly of her work at Walmart, and Claire talked briefly of needing to find a job to supplement her work in the family business before starting her course in the Fall, but despite the creation of resumes, and Monster.com accounts there was very
little talk of the process of looking for/getting jobs in the student’s narratives. I wonder, as I considered the data and Nygreen’s (2013) words, are educators providing a disservice by subjugating the school to labor pathway for contemporary youth?

**Engaging with technology.**

In the year that this research was completed, Shady Grove High School instituted one-on-one computing, presumably with a vision to better prepare students with the technological skills needed for the contemporary market place. Because this was the first year, Shady Grove’s seniors – including those in *Journey Beyond* - had the unfortunate position of experiencing this dramatic change in pedagogy in their last year of schooling. From observing Ms. Lane’s classroom,²⁴ on a day to day basis this meant classes now had websites students that went to for their assignments, while homework and classwork were submitted electronically, and books or required reading were accessed online.

Although the topic of technology was not initiated in interviews (see Appendix 2) and rarely in conversation, the topic did come up frequently and students explicitly discussed their feelings about one-to-one computing and these were overwhelmingly negative²⁵. My field notes revealed that students were not initially, if at all, using technology in practical or robust ways (field notes, September 4, 2012). There were days when most of the class was on social media and less than half the class was engaged in

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²⁴ Sometimes I arrived early, so sat in on Ms. Lane’s Sophomore level English class.  
²⁵ Presumably students who did not have such strong feelings were less inclined to bring it up
the assignment at hand. This changed somewhat when administration blocked Facebook. From their conversational interviews and narrative writings about high school, it became apparent that technology was slowly becoming integrated into their academic experiences.

For instance, the first series of Power Point projects that students in the course were required to complete contained images that obstructed words, and color schemes that made the text unreadable. The second series of presentations (shared later in the year) demonstrated students’ growing ease with using Power Point and multimodal forms; in fact, students created presentations that were more sophisticated and reader friendly. Nevertheless, an important point to highlight here is that the use of technology (including one-to-one computing) for students who do not identify as college bound does not enhance focal students’ reactions to or interactions in school or preparation for the careers to which they aspire.

Issues of technology often feed into bigger issues related to organization, engagement, and interests, often narrowing the divides between what students do at home and at school, or, as Wiseman (2009) points out, “technology obliterates the distinction between home and school” (p. 43). As shown in the presented data, the focal students did not leave aspects of their personal and emotional lives at home; they used their narrative engagements, including their digital stories, to share personal aspects of their home lives.

26 Though reportedly the ‘messenger’ function of Facebook was quickly replaced with Twitter.
at school. In this way, they were able to be themselves and wrestle with hardships as they engaged in important narrative work.

**Connecting Back to the Literature, Theory and Methodology**

**Rural students, rural schools.**

I believe that scholars who focus on education that is caring and humanizing can contribute insights into how we understand and work with rural students and their narrative engagements inside schools. Fine and Weis (2003), for instance, believe that in order to re-imagine schools as places that support, inspire, and nurture students, we need to include all stakeholders (e.g., parents, policy makers, educators, community activists and students) in educational conversations. Although I do not present all of these voices in this dissertation, I do present the voices of students to highlight the realities they say they face.

The literature on rural schools frequently positions school at the crux of a dichotomy between localized community interest and a national agenda that rewards, encourages, and privileges schools that focus on standardized assessment and quantifiable educational products (Schafft, 2010). Though there are schools that manage to integrate common core curriculum with relevant and contextualized learning, the exemplars are few and far between (Howley & Howley, 2010; Schafft, 2010). The larger context for both this work and the students’ stories is the interplay between what students want and what the system wants for them, even if students themselves are unaware of the systematic tugging and larger decision making that determines the content of their curriculum.
As described earlier, the thinking about rural schools and their role in the broader context has a historical precedent, one that has long positioned rural people and schools as “the problem” which needs to be transformed. This dissertation delves into the positions of students who are not planning to go to college immediately after high school. In their narrative engagements—from their interviews, obstacle papers, and digital stories—I try to complicate the pervasively stereotypical ways some people think about and position rural students and their aspirations.

Recall that in asking questions, listening to students’ responses, and analyzing their narratives (see Chapter 4), I was interested in the themes that emerged when they talked about school, their futures, and the connections between the two. Ultimately, as the chapters of this dissertation unfolded, Shafft’s (2010) questions, “To whom is education accountable? What purposes does it serve? (pp. 276, 277, 285), took on new meaning.

Students in this study perceive that an underlying assumption of education at Shady Grove High School is that students should be college bound, and that to be anything else is somehow less than desirable. Behind this push toward college exists a valid belief that students need a college degree to have more job options and economic prospects for their future. Students without sufficient education or skills, it is often argued, are more likely to struggle to find work that pays above the minimum wage. Carr and Keflas (2009) note that teenagers without bills to pay, but who do work regularly might have an artificial sense of what it is like to earn money and to pay bills; they may have scant recognition that, overtime, their earning potential is limited.

At Shady Grove, the study participants seemed to have the attitude that if it (e.g., not attending college; working in a family business; etc.) was good enough for their
family members, then it was good enough for them. Claire, for instance, reported frustration at the ongoing pressure to “do more,” and this only served to alienate her from the school’s counseling department and their desire to bend her will. Telling a student their desired career path is not enough, particularly when that path is following in the family’s footsteps, is tantamount to telling a student his/her family is not good enough. Yet many of the students in Journey Beyond Shady Grove did plan to go to a two-year institution for a clinical or technical degree; however, this choice was not highly viewed by adults at the school. The literature on rural youth and rural education (Donehower, Hogg, & Schell, 2012; Schafft & Jackson, 2010) examine the need for adults to affirm the identities and choices of students in ways that support and not denigrate them. This is an important lesson for educators working with rural youth to practice.

**Belonging in Shady Grove.**

Throughout this study, students reflected on and critiqued their educational experiences by reflecting on how elements from their personal lives impact who they are and what they are asked to do inside school. They also critiqued their experiences at the backdrop of insights shared with them from friends, siblings, parents, and neighbors who shared stories with them about being former students at Shady Grove (to include stories about the adolescent identities of current teachers and administrators at the school). As Bruner (2002) recounts, nothing creates a story faster than an event deviating from expectation. Multiple generations of experience solidify the expectations about what school *should* be and how *schools* should be run.
At Shady Grove, I noted that many of the students and teachers made references to the younger days of administrative staff, shared stories about teachers when they were high school students, and exchanged information about the generations of students who graduated from Shady Grove and who are now adults in the community. Comments on Mr. Connect’s school blog further illuminate this intergenerational connectedness of belonging at Shady Grove and in the local community.

Whether perceived as a community strength or obstacle, this context appeared to contribute to a general feeling that students and their parents do have a voice in what happens at school. There have been some vociferous examples in recent years, where decisions made by the school administration have been openly questioned by students and their parents. I was less interested in the issues being debated and more invested in the knowledge that students, parents, and administration did engage in debate on topics related to the engagements of students in school and in the community.

For example, Rob, a peer of Greg, Claire, and Alexa, commented on how administration at the school punished a group of students for activities that occurred at a non-school event. Rob did not believe the school had any “jurisdiction to do that [punish students]. It wasn't on school property, it wasn't on school time or anything.” However, as Rob reflected on the administration’s actions, he noted that the assistant principal and the superintendent both live in his neighborhood. Therefore, the division between in and out of school activities is blurred and students’ report the belief that the community has their best interests at heart. Amber’s sentiment best reflected the feeling of her peer group when she said, “I think they [the community] care. They seem to care. I hope they care” (Interview, January 22, 2013). Underlying most of these students’ narrative engagements
presented throughout this dissertation study is their acceptance of place and a desire to stay connected, in some way, to their community and the people there.

**Critical multiculturalism.**

I side with Kleinman (2006) when he writes “we are morally responsible for ensuring that others understand the social injustice our worlds routinely create, including what we have brought about through our own actions. And we are also responsible for doing something about injustice” (p. 24), for this is how I view critical multiculturalism. As researchers and educators ‘we are morally responsible for helping students understand the social injustice our worlds routinely create’ and helping them to envision ways they can resist and challenge said injustice (Kinloch, 2012). Critical multiculturalism then is a framework for considering and analyzing experience and implementing pedagogy that can transform both the way students view themselves and the worlds they live in (Kinloch, 2011; May & Sleeter, 2010).

As discussed, Greg, Claire (and to a lesser extent Alexa’s) narrative engagements in this study revealed limited support for their career aspirations. In reaction I consider Finn (2009) who notes, “most teachers represent the interests of the dominant group and the status quo without being aware of it” (p. 177) while Nygreen (2013) states there is a “general tendency to reproduce than reimagine dominant practices and discourses of schooling” (p. 154). Both these scholars speak to the situation in which support is best offered to those students whose career trajectories are already in line with the expectations adults have set for them. The work of critical multiculturalism is viewing Greg and Claire’s alternative career trajectories as openings (Greene, 1995) in which
educators consider the more expansive conceptual possibilities of what students want, and how to push and challenge students from that place, while simultaneously supporting their choices and decisions. The work of critical multiculturalism is viewing Greg and Claire’s career trajectories as openings (Greene, 1995) in which the students interrogate and act on their own stories and aspirations, considering the factors, which they believe, are limiting who they can be as students and/or citizens and/or professionals.

The narratives of Greg, Claire, and Alexa point to the necessity for educators to ask students to share stories of their choosing with adults and peers in their schools. The production and sharing of stories can encourage students to reveal and complicate narratives they have of themselves, others have of them, and create new ones. In this way, students might be encouraged to engage in critical self-reflexive work as they interrogate power relations within the context of the curricula and the school, which are fundamental goals of critical multiculturalism. An additional goal of critical multiculturalism is to provide students an opportunity to not only tell their stories, but to nuance their perspectives related to “getting out” and never looking back (see Alexa’s narratives). Theoretically, critical multiculturalism provides an opportunity for Alexa and her peers to question the role of education in their lives as they reframe their schooling experiences and stories of self in positive ways. Schooling serves not as a wasted time, but as an opportunity for students to see what is possible.

Throughout the analysis of data, I continually return to the insistent demand of students for educators to do a better job in getting to know and understand them and their aspirations. Critical multiculturalism, as a theoretical approach, is grounded in a critical awareness for educators to get to know students, to provide them with equitable
educational opportunities in order for them to be successful, and to support students as they come to assert agency in schools and throughout society.

**Narrative inquiry: the power of stories.**

Student narratives – across their class work and their interviews – were relatively consistent in theme for each student. Using various data sources across the course, in many ways served to triangulate the data and confirm specific student viewpoints. Their texts and stories intersect and connect and could be used in conjunction with each other to provide a more complete picture of the student’s stance. In this way, I view storytelling as a space for challenging, critiquing and pushing students. I view storytelling as a way to help them develop their voices, not just become echoes. Their narratives, their digital stories in particular, became what Morrell (2008) calls “living texts” (p. 170). Through the assigned narrative engagements in *Journey Beyond Shady Grove*, the students were writing and producing texts that provided a space for reflection and metacognition, something Morrell (2008) considers “writing as care for the self” (p. 170). Further, the assignments in this course were engaging students to become “skilled investigators who produce and share knowledge relevant to social change” (Rogers, Morrell & Enyedy, 2007, p 419), who are reading and writing and producing scripts that help them create and recreate their identities of who they want to be as active participants in their lives and communities beyond higher education.

Another important point is the reciprocal and bidirectional nature of story and lived experience. Frank (2010) asks us to “think about and study stories so that we can learn to live better with the stories that surround and circulate through our lives” (p.1)
because narrative scholars (Bruner, 2002; Frank, 2010; King, 2003; Holstein & Gubrium, 2000) believe that the stories we tell are shaped by lived experience, which then shape the way we perceive reality. In this way, stories can operate to affect the choices we make and the lives we live (Bruner, 2002; Frank, 2010), thus stories can both offer and constrain possibilities.²⁷

Frank (2010) considers some stories as anchors and others as rafts, with the ocean serving as a metaphor for life. An anchor story is one, which does not help a person to move through the waters. While it might not cast a person adrift, it could tie a person down, potentially drowning the possibilities of more successful outcomes. I consider stories that students tell where “education is not important” because they will “never need this stuff anyway” as anchor stories. In my opinion, they are the justifications used by one too many student who does not complete high school, or uses the “irrelevance” of their education as an excuse not to pursue additional training or qualifications. For example, Greg talked about working with “a guy that has raced for 16 years and he has said that school never taught him anything… He said that the only schooling that helped him was going to C-Tech to become a mechanic.” Explicit in Greg’s comment is the uselessness of school (as already discussed).

Perhaps the stories shared all throughout this dissertation are really Frank’s (2010) rafts, or simply stories of possibility. Maybe for Greg, racecar driving is more

²⁷ Schafft (2010) also alludes to this idea, although she does not talk about it in quite the same way. She writes of larger societal narratives as “sociocultural discursive mechanisms that structure what might be imagined as possible” (p.277).
than enough. For Claire, becoming a cosmetologist might be abundantly fulfilling, and for Alexa going to college might be a way for her to heal and move beyond the tremendous amount of pain she has already endured.

**Limitations: The Gaps and The Glitches.**

Though the students’ narrative engagements in *Journey Beyond Shady Grove* and this research provided me insight into the perspectives of rural youth as they consider their educational experiences, the scope of the study might be considered a limitation of the work. There were things students did not talk about. Greg outright told me that “there are lots of things you don’t know about,” which admittedly, was true. I took his claim as an attempt to establish authority in our conversation. Furthermore, students did not appear to have had a good idea of my allegiance to the school’s administration. Earlier I suggested that the stories I elicited were partly due to my role as a researcher and a listener; a different researcher and listener might have approached this research in a different direction and with different research questions related to the educational experiences and engagements of rural high school students.

A bigger limitation of this study had to do with the fact that the majority of the stories were shared within a classroom context (among students, teacher, researcher) and there was little to no critique, commentary, and back-and-forth engagement built into the curriculum or the evaluative process. Students did the work and received credit, and the events, memories, and desires they shared did not always receive what I consider to be a thoughtful and deliberate response. Students’ narrative engagements, then, were deserving of rich conversation and discussion.
In future versions of this work, I seek to include a peer group dynamic in order for students to tell stories and receive responses. This might be a much bigger task than is possible, but I believe it is a task that can be supported through utilization of small groups that provide students opportunities for dialogue (Bruner, 1996). Related to this point is that a more comprehensive understanding of the issues presented in students’ narratives might have been garnered if career and guidance counselors were a part of the course and, thus, my dissertation study. In the future, I would plan to meet with and interview these educators because their perspectives, roles, and stories are important to include in research on the narrative engagements and schooling experiences of rural high school students.

Finally, I wonder if I have over simplified the social and economic considerations for young people growing up in a rural community. As Carr and Kefalas (2010) darkly note “many of the young people who stay in the countryside get tripped up when they try to play by twentieth-century rules in a twenty-first century economy, and by the time they do understand, it’s too late” (p. 82). But, I defer back to Finn (2009) who writes, ordinary citizens are protected from callousness, greed and self-interest of the powerful, and in some cases from honestly held conservative values and beliefs, only by legal rights on paper, but by healthy citizen participation… Schools spend nearly all their energy on preparing students to improve their lot by individual advancement… which reinforces the meritocracy myth – while in fact the route to acquiring social rights for a vast majority of their students is a collective struggle not individual advancement” (pp. 174- 175).
In future versions of this work, I seek to include more explicit discussions with students about money, jobs, the community, and social action. Like Dewey (1938) I am “confident of the potentialities of education when it is treated as intelligently directed development of the possibilities inherent in ordinary experience” (p. 89).

**Moving Forward and Conclusions**

Perhaps we could take a stance that school is not for everybody and we could foolishly aim to educate most of our students while paying little attention to the outliers who perform well below the normative curve. But as long as the law states that students are required to attend school for a set amount of years or until they reach a certain age, then we must continue to critique and query the education students are receiving. It is our responsibility to provide students with an education that is useful to who they are and who they seek to be, and one way to do this work is by relying on the usefulness and power of narrative work. As Clandinin and Connelly (2000) write, “we have helped make the world in which we find ourselves. We are not merely objective inquirers, people on the high road, who study a world lesser in quality than our moral temperament would have it, people who study a world we did not help create.” They continue: “On the contrary, we are complicit in the world we study. Being in this world, we need to remake ourselves as well as offer up research understandings that could lead to a better world” (p. 61).

Clandinin and Connelly’s (2000) point gets me to contemplate what we (educators) want from students and for students, and how what we both want from and for them could be realized through narrative engagements. If, I assume, we want them to
work hard and to care passionately about learning, then maybe we should invite them to
take on important roles and responsibilities that support how they inquire into knowledge
and how they come to make conclusions about their future aspirations. In this way, we
can also get closer to understanding how students belong in and to school, and under
what constraints their belonging is defined.

Insofar as this dissertation study is concerned, I entered it thinking about the idea
of belonging—what it means to belong to a place, a space or a community. As I collected
and analyzed the narratives of the students in this study, I thought more about belonging
and I am now leaving thinking about knowing. In a variety of ways, the students
communicated their desires to be seen, understood, and known, simultaneously reporting
that they felt cared for by their community. Yet the disconnect between how students
belong and how students are known is apparent in how they think about school and what
they share in their narratives. Many of them are ready to tell their stories and require little
to no prompting to talk about the issues weighing them down. Alexa was explicit about
this, saying that researchers should study the “realness of high school,” we should care
about “who the people are and what they’re going through, and how they’re doing with
going through high school in their life”.

Analysis of the narrative engagements of the students and the fragments of
reflection and confession I collected does not lead me to a nice, tidy summary to this
dissertation study. I continue to ask: Who are these students? Who will they become?
How might schools better serve their needs by getting to know their needs? What is the
role of narrative inquiry in this process of getting to know students? How does critical
multiculturalism, theoretically, move educators and students to a place of inquiry that is
both critical and reflexive and that interrogates power relations among students, teachers, administrators, and the inequitable approach to education that is often used to educate students for the world? In thinking about these questions in this dissertation and in further research that will result after this dissertation, I rely on Nel Noddings, who challenges us to care and to teach from a place of caring. I look to Maxine Greene who asks educators to looks for openings and reach for freedom in order to create change alongside students. These stories serve as ways into the lives of students; they are invitations for educators to connect with and listen to students in order for meaningful learning that must take place.

Although in Ms. Lane’s Journey Beyond Shady Grove classes were the homecoming king and a homecoming king contender, by the virtue of the label, “non-college bound,” many of the students in this class had relatively low social standing at the school in comparison to their peers. Many of them also had Individual Education Plans (IEPs) and received support services. This information is important to highlight and the students’ narratives are important to acknowledge and cultivate because in some way, they can give voice to some of those students who are most frequently overlooked in high school.

**Epilogue: One Last Story**

This is a study of stories: stories about education, stories about high school, and stories about futures. These stories are about the way these three things intersect and also of the way students constitute and reconstitute themselves through the stories they tell.

After I had completed my dissertation research at Shady Grove, I relocated to Saipan to write my dissertation. Saipan is a small tropical island in the South Pacific, 12
miles long by 4 miles wide. Outside of the chain of islands it sits in, there is only wide blue water for thousands of miles. Ironically, given my research site, this was the first time I had ever lived in a small community where everyone knew everyone else’s business.

Before I went to Shady Grove, I came to this work thinking about belonging and how themes of belonging interacted with story and education. But at this juncture, I conclude it is not only belonging we all seek, but knowing and being known. Ayers and Quinn (2012) call for schools that aim for “a commitment to free inquiry, questioning, and participation; a push for access and equity and simple fairness; a curriculum that encouraged independent though and judgment; a standard of full recognition of the humanity of each individual” (p. ix). The key here is the “humanity of each individual” (Ayers & Quinn, 2012, p. ix). Critical pedagogy respects the individual student and their individual strivings for learning in ways that are meaningful for their personal journeys as learners and citizens; it strives towards liberation through education (hooks, 1994). This does not divorce the individual from the larger community, for if students are learning in ways that meets their needs; they too will understand their responsibilities to their communities for fostering social justice and change (Kinloch, 2012).

The data in this dissertation study revealed the individual aspirations of three students, as well as their vision for what they feel education is, isn’t and might be. The subtext to their stories is a desire to be known at school. Students asked to be understood.

28 See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j2yjBNMOMKQ
within the process of their education. Many of the students, like Claire, already felt that they belonged to the community, but it was high school that did not fit in with their life plans. For Greg and Claire in particular High school was positioned in conflict with their aspirations, as the stranger in the tale, sometimes a bully, rarely a friend.

So I conclude with the words of Claire and Alexa. According to Claire, “I refuse to fall onto the ideal path of so many others when I know it’s not right for me… Why does it seem like we are being pushed and limited…?” and according to Alexa, “I am here to … become everything I ever wanted to be.” Perhaps it is time to re-envision what high school might be for non-college bound rural high school youth. Through students narratives and place-based pedagogies, which include critical examination of the educational supports and limitations students perceive in their lives, perhaps high schools can better serve this population so that future students when asked will say: high school is useful, engaging, for me, and pushes me to become who I want be.
Appendix A: Digital Storytelling Prompts

The Shady Grove students were given the following digital story telling assignment prompt in the form of a worksheet:

As a senior we anticipate you are looking back on your high school years at the same time you are looking forward to your future. Based on your high school experiences choose from one of the options below:

- Tell a story that illustrates how you think your high school education has/not prepared you for your life beyond high school.
- Tell a story that illustrates why you think high school education is/is not important.
- Tell a story that illustrates your best or worst moment/event at school and the ways that this experience has shaped you.
- Tell a story that illustrates something high school administrators, teachers and policy makers need to know about you in order to make high school a better place for other students.
- Tell a story that illustrates the ways school does/not reflect your life outside of school and why this does/not matter.”
Appendix B: Student Interview Questions

Inside-Out: Students’ Narratives of High School Experience

Tentative Student Questions and Topics
Data gathered from the high school classes will focus on particular issues, events, or documents with which the students have been involved, and will be based on pedagogical and curricular decision making of the classroom teachers. However, we anticipate collecting information around the standard set of topics listed below.

Possible Questions
We are interested in learning about you, your school experiences and your future. We are wondering how high schoolers feel about their education and how you think your school prepares you for the future, to be the person you want to be…

About students:
1. What three words would you use to describe yourself?
2. How do you think other people would describe you?
3. What do you want other people to know about you?

About school:
4. Finish this sentence: High school is ______________
5. Do you think school is important? Why? Why not?
6. We are trying to understand how high schoolers feel about and experience high school. Can you describe a favorite high school moment.. what made it your favorite?
7. Can you describe your worst high school moment.. what made it your worst?
8. What do you plan to do when you leave high school?

9. How do you think high school has prepared you for that?

10. Do you think you will be well prepared to leave high school? Why? Why not?

11. Have you had a teacher that made you feel good about your future? Why? What did they do? What special qualities about them do you wish more teachers had?

12. What are your friends saying about the future? Life after high school?

13. What do you think your family and friends want you to do once you graduate?

14. How do you think your school community feels about you as a student? Why or why not?

15. Do you feel a tie to the school?

16. When you are looking back at this time of your life what do you think you will remember?

17. Tell me three words that describe high school

18. How do you think we could make high school better for today’s students?

19. If you could give your principal one piece of advice what would it be?

20. If you could give teachers one piece of advice what would it be?

21. If you could give researchers who study high schools and high schoolers what would it be?

**Looking back at your educational experiences:**

22. Who was one of your favorite teachers and why? What were the qualities that made him/her your favorite?

23. What class do you think you learned the most in? why? why not?
24. What kinds of social groups do you have at your school? How does this affect who you think you are and who you want to become when you graduate?

25. What about movies about high school? or television shows? do they accurately reflect today’s high school experience? Do you think they change how people think about high school and high schoolers?

**More about students:**

26. How would your family and friends describe you?

27. What interests you?

28. What do you do for fun?

29. If you had three wishes around your future and education what would they be?
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