Action Civics in Rural Communities

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We used an action civics curriculum and conducted a qualitative analysis of two fifth-grade classrooms in a rural setting called Green Independent School District (pseudonym). We organized the curriculum into a week-long study whereby we conducted interviews, collected student work, and analyzed teacher and student data. We focused on Baiocchi et al.'s (2014) concept of the civic imagination to analyze rural students' beliefs about themselves as citizens as they engaged in an action civics inquiry model of learning. Three primary findings emerged from our data; an emphasis on solidarity by citizens in the community, student use of problem-solving through civic imagination, and challenging discussions in classroom settings.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, 14.6 million children in the United States attend public schools in rural areas (McFarland et al., 2019). Educators believe the large population of students who go to school in these rural areas receives little consideration from the federal government (Brenner, 2016; Sipple & Brent, 2009; Strange 2011). Lester (2012) discusses the disconnect between federal policies and rural educational contexts, noting that until the uniqueness of rural contexts is acknowledged "by federal, state, and local governments, the educational policy will likely continue to represent urban mindsets, providing a potential disservice to many rural students" (p. 408). Similarly, Azano and Stewart (2015) describe rural students as a "forgotten minority" (p. 1). One factor that contributes to the lack of attention given to rural educational settings is the problematic framing of rural areas as anything not urban (Greenough & Nelson, 2015) or as "any place smaller than where I live" (Strange, 2011, p. 9). Due to the unclear categorization of rural areas, it is difficult for rural schools to receive adequate attention from education policymakers (Sipple & Brent, 2009). The very definition of a "rural community" is complex. For many researchers and policymakers, a "rural community" simply denotes small and having characteristics of solidarity and a sense of belonging (Brenner, 2016; Schafft, 2016).

Social studies education which includes a focus on civics education is a required component of the

Texas Curriculum (TEA, 2007) and is highly applicable to stundets in rural schools. The purpose of social studies, in particular civics education, is to prepare students to be global citizens in a world that is progressive and internationally connected (Altinay 2011; NCSS, 2013). In such an interconnected world, it is easy to see rural schools as antiquated and poorly equipped to prepare their students for citizenship. Burton et al. (2013) discovered that social studies education falls behind other content areas in rural-focused studies. This knowledge deficit is a major blind spot in the field of social studies education if the goal of the field is to support all students become active citizens. A huge number of rural studies experience this civic gap as rural schools make up 32.9 percent of all schools and 20.4 percent of all students in the USA (Johnson et al., 2014).

Rural communities are complex places where many nuances in values and social systems exist. Therefore, the complex civic practices, perceptions, supports, and educations of rural citizen need to be considered. A thorough investigation of data regarding voting trends, socio-economic status, and educational attainment reveal the potential complexities of rural community characteristics. However, these factors may not always be evident because of social isolation. The isolation can exacerbate social problems such as alcoholism and mental health. Because of this rural communities are sometimes offered inadequate social support and things like emergency services are often lacking

(Azano & Stewart, 2015; Corbett, 2014). Rural civic issues require examining the most prominent adult voices, such as the city mayor, council, and community leaders, as crucial to understanding the context of civic education in rural settings. That is the reasoning behind connecting youth to like-minded adults in a community (Sutherland et. al, 2022).

Information garnered about rural citizenship instruction must be moderated by inconsistencies in the use of the term 'rural' which is an issue of concern across rural research (Cromartie and Bucholtz, 2008). Most knowledge about rural citizenship education comes from national surveys that designate 'rural' or 'small towns' as one of many categories or from studies that use rural educational settings during convenience sampling. Based on the literature reviewed for this article, it appears that very few investigations in social studies education sample rural teachers to learn explicitly about the contexts of rural schooling (Waterson & Moffa, 2016). It is worth noting that home, church, and community represent contexts in which students learn social studies. However, a primary focus of public schools and social studies teachers is to cultivate the concept of citizenship in children (Martin & Chiodo, 2007).

In addition to the lack of federal support, schools in rural areas also face Schools and communities in rural areas also face significant socio-economic challenges, and the limited focus rural schools receive from the federal government and education policy (Dillon & Young, 2011; Greenough & Nelson, 2015; Waterson & Moffa, 2016). Similar to concerns facing impoverished urban communities, rural communities often lack sufficient community facilities and adequate educational resources, including retaining teachers who understand the uniqueness of a rural context (Azano, 2015; Azano & Stewart, 2015; Barley & Beesley, 2007; Gibbs, 1998; Lay, 2006). Collectively, rural populations have a higher poverty rate than metropolitan areas and experience many of the economic difficulties well documented within urban communities (Kusmin, 2012; Lay, 2006). Rural communities face fewer employment opportunities, lower levels of educational attainment, and higher poverty rates (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2015). With the recent job losses in industries such as agriculture, timber, mining, and manufacturing, many rural areas continue to experience substantial population declines (Dillon & Young, 2011). As jobs within these industries decrease, schools must adapt or alter their educational focus, preparing students for more urban-related occupations, further changing the nature of life and schooling in rural areas (Schafft, 2016).

Fortunately, even with the challenging realities existing in rural communities, Waterson and Moffa (2016) contend schools and individuals in these areas possess many positive attributes that provide opportunities for civic education and engagement, including self-reliance, volunteerism, a high sense of civic duty, and a strong sense of place. Lyson (2005) notes that rural communities "serve as places that nurture participation in civic and social affairs and as such can be viewed as nodes that anchor people to place" (p. 23). Tight social systems within rural communities differ from urban areas, and the relationships formed within rural areas impact the community culture (Magill et. al, 2022) and behaviors of community members (Lay, 2006). Lay (2006) and Gimpel and Karnes (2006) note that individuals in rural areas are more likely to be civically engaged than those in non-rural or poor urban areas. As Lay (2006) notes, "small towns and rural areas are often described as bastions of American civic life" (p. 320). Similarly expressed by Martin and Chiodo (2007), students in rural areas desire opportunities to serve within their communities, exhibiting selflessness and empathy for others. Cultivating these characteristics in educational settings will hopefully encourage students to increase civic engagement and participation, a tangible means of improving life within a community (Dillon & Young, 2011).

To both attend to and better understand how students in rural communities conceptualize and pursue civic life, we worked through a week-long action civics curriculum with two fifth-grade classrooms in a rural community. The elementary school we call "Green Elementary" (pseudonym). We looked to Baiocchi et al.'s (2014) concept of the civic imagination to analyze rural students' beliefs about themselves as citizens as they engaged in an action civics inquiry model of learning. As stated by Mills (1959), individual identity is shaped by the society where they live. The people around them, family, friends, and the context where they live all contribute to the lens they see themselves and others. Furthermore, we considered how students' civic knowledge, attitudes, and dispositions changed after completing an action civics inquiry cycle.

Literature Review: Problems and Possibilities for Rural Civic Education

Rural communities possess unique characteristics that result in a specific set of challenges and possibilities for the education of their young people. In describing the overlooked particularities of rural schooling, Howley (1997) discusses the need to distinguish between what he refers to as *local* (rural) and *cosmopolitan* commitments. Howley lists nine local commitments found across rural literature, including:

- sense of attachment to rural places
- the relationship between school and community sustainability
- proper aims for an education committed to the rural community
- rural pathways to rural adulthoods; community engagement in rural schools
- rural community and educational stewardship
- curricula to sustain rural places; small-scale organization in rural schooling and community
- cultivation of appropriate local meanings, knowledge, and commitments (p. 136)

Howley places this local list in comparison to a list of cosmopolitan commitments that include educational efforts focused on working to "overcome the disadvantages of students' backgrounds" and "implement 'best practice' (i.e., nationally validated methods and programs)" (p. 136). Waterson and Moffa (2016) also speak to the uniqueness of rural schooling, noting that, "While norms vary by region and ethnicity, generally, rural children tend to be raised under traditional values that create strong family and community bonds" (p. 225). Barley and Beesley (2007) studied rural schools determined to be high-performing and high-needs and found the community school relationship to be a critical factor in their success. However, despite the intense feelings of community in rural contexts, rural settings face issues such as lack of resources and teaching personnel for advanced subjects. Academic success often results in students leaving their rural community searching for learning opportunities elsewhere (Moffa, 2019).

Rural contexts also present unique challenges and opportunities for citizenship education. Waterson and Moffa (2016) discuss common sociopolitical factors that contribute to rural conceptions of citizenship, including "a strong sense of place, economic hardships, conservative political ideologies, and distrustful sentiments toward government" (pp. 10-11). In a more recent study, Moffa (2019) considered the role of rural teachers' conceptualization of place on the teaching of civics through place-based pedagogical frameworks. In this study, Moffa found teachers in a rural context paradoxically approached the teaching of civics: "While participants utilized local resources to each civic concept, they deemphasized local problems and students' roles in solving them, opting instead to focus on the perceived relevance of traditional civic knowledge" (p. 115). In Moffa's study, participants wrestled with wanting to localize the curriculum while also operating under the assumption that students would eventually leave the community. Moffa considered the teachers' assumption that by participating teachers that students would eventually leave the community "detracts from civic investments in rural communities, permitting leavers to dissociate from the political life of their home communities and stayers likely being under-prepared for local civic life and feeling resentment" (p. 117).

However, educational actors in rural communities can capitalize on notions of place with their students to form genuine understandings of the relationship between self and community. Waterson and Moffa (2016) posit that "a strong sense of place could motivate a rural citizen's involvement in local politics" (p. 214) and "suggest rural contexts offer untapped possibilities for proactive democratic life" (p. 214). Lyson (2005) writes on the importance of schools to rural community viability, noting that rural schools serve as places "where generations come together and where community identity is formed" (p. 24). Looking explicitly at rural students, Martin and Chiodo (2007) reported that rural students believe good citizenship is grounded in community service, not political engagement. While the authors are optimistic that rural students' conceptualizations of citizenship were age-appropriate (8th and 11th-grade students), this study implicitly suggests rural teachers emphasize personally responsible citizenship (see Westheimer & Kahne, 2004) and not more justice-oriented notions of citizenship (Waterson & Moffa, 2016).

Theoretical Framework

Action civics, rooted in Positive Youth Development (PYD), is an educational practice that promises to engage students in activities that help them develop a "voice" in the public arena and become informed about issues that affect their lives. Action civics "is a broad term used to describe

curricula and programs that go beyond traditional civics programs by combining learning and practice" (CIRCLE, 2013, p.2). This approach insists that "students *do* and *behave* as citizens by engaging in a cycle of research, action, and reflection about problems they care about personally while learning about deeper principles of effective civic and especially political action" (Levinson 2012, p. 224).

An action civics approach to civic and citizenship education pushes back on normalized notions of "good" citizenship often produced and reproduced in the classroom settings. These normalized notions of citizenship tend to emphasize individualism and civic republican and liberal frameworks for civic education (Abowitz & Harnish, 2006), which leads to limited understandings of a "good" citizen as someone who is personally responsible (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). Many have examined civic identity, community, and social involvement (Biesta, Lawy, & Kelly, 2009; Freire, 2000; Giroux, 2010; Magill, 2019). However, schooling experiences are too often tied to a monolithic curriculum that does not account for students' lived experience, urban or rural. As Giroux (2010) suggests, "rarely do educators ask questions about how schools can prepare students to be informed citizens, nurture a civic imagination, or teach them to be self-reflective about public issues and the world in which they live" (p. 716).

Therefore, offering students a context in which they can strengthen their community and political engagement knowledge while working towards community change through self-directed inquiry is potentially vital for their civic empowerment. To better understand the connection between informed citizenship, civic identity, and civic engagement we considered the concept of civic imagination (Baiocchi et al., 2014). The civic imagination extends Mills' (1959) sociological imagination, which first suggested that an individual must reconcile the complex relationships between one's personal and historical place. Baiocchi et al. (2014) built upon this idea, describing the individual's place within a historical and political context as emerging from one's civic imagination. Access to one's civic imagination allows one to see their political place in the world-leading them to the possibility of reimagining how they are part of redefining the political context in which they exist. These ideas can inform the ways students engage in civic action and can help students transform real social issues (Hart-Brinson, 2016). Therefore, we framed our findings by examining the school/community structures, civic

imagination, agency, advocacy, and emancipatory possibility related to an action civics learning experience.

Agency describes an individual's power to control his or her own goals, actions, and destiny (Bjerede, 2017). In the late 1980s, Albert Bandura began developing a social cognition theory that he connected with self-efficacy. He later examined the role of agency and motivation and coined the term "Agentic," in which people see themselves as having the ability to self-organize, be proactive, self-reflect, and self-regulate. Agentic learning is defined by self-directed actions aimed at personal growth and development based on self-chosen goals. Within the classroom context, students initiate actions of their own volition that drive their learning. In choosing topics that interest them, students are developing a sense of agency. They care about issues in their community and want to be a part of a viable solution.

Emancipatory possibility identifies a central moral purpose in the production of knowledge-eliminating oppression and creating the conditions for human flourishing. The word social relates to the idea that human emancipation depends upon transforming the social world, not just persons' inner lives. Emancipatory possibility encompasses three tasks:

- identifying a diagnosis and critique of the world as it exists
- envisioning viable alternatives
- understanding the obstacles, possibilities, and dilemmas of the transformation

Our students engaged in emancipatory possibility when they researched a community issue. The research questions and the identification of the root cause of a community issue lead them through the fundamental tasks of understanding the pros and cons of their community issue, thereby guiding them to choosing like-minded adults who could share insights into their identified problem.

Methods

We used a case study design (Yin, 2014) to examine how participating in an action civics project might affect rural fifth-graders understanding of citizenship. Our research questions were:

1. How are rural students' understandings of citizenship influenced by participating in an action civics inquiry model for learning?
2. In what ways, if any, do rural contexts influence students' beliefs about themselves

as citizens as they complete an action civics inquiry project?

The definition of "case study" is two-fold, according to Yin (2014). The first part defines the scope of the case study, paying particular attention to a "contemporary phenomenon in depth and situated in a real-world context" (p.16). The second part of the definition focuses on the "features" of the inquiry. A case study in this aspect copes with the technically distinctive situation in which there will be many variables of interest rather than data points and thus, relies on multiple sources of evidence (Yin, 2014). Case studies that rely on multiple sources of evidence benefit from the prior development of a theoretical proposition to guide data collection and analysis.

Context

This study took place in a southwestern remote rural school district defined by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2007). The district includes just under 2,500 residents (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019) and covers about 98 square miles (24 people per square mile). The majority of residents in the school district are married, speak English at home, and have at least a high school diploma. According to the state's academic report, at the data collection point, just under 250 students were attending the district's only elementary school, Small Town Elementary (PK-6). In a Title 1 school, nearly 60% of students are "economically disadvantaged." Mirroring the school district's total population, 85% of students are White, 12% are of Hispanic origin, and 3% identify as "two or more races," as noted on the state report. The state did not rank the school for the 2019-2020 academic year because it was in a "declared state of disaster" during the COVID-19 pandemic. The previous year, the school was given a "C" performance rating on an A-F scale based on assessment results.

As of the 2019-2020 school year, Green Independent School District had 453 students. 37.3% of students were considered at risk of dropping out of school. 1.8% of students were enrolled in bilingual and English language learning programs. The school received an accountability rating of B for the previous school year. Because of the coronavirus pandemic, the state waived accountability ratings for the 2019-2020 school year. In the Class of 2019, 97.1% of students received their high school diplomas on time or earlier. The average SAT score at Green ISD was 1054 for 2018-2019 graduates. The average ACT score was 17.1. As of the 2019-2020 school year, an average teacher's salary was $50,461, which is $6,630 less than the state average. On average, teachers had 15.4 years of experience.

The student body at the schools served by Green Independent School District is 86.1% White, 0.7% Black, 1.3% Asian or Asian/Pacific Islander, 10.4% Hispanic/Latino, 0% American Indian or Alaska Native, and 0% Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander. In addition, 1.5% of students are two or more races, and 0% have not specified their race or ethnicity. Also, 51% of students are female, and 49% of students are male. At schools in Green Independent School District, 49.4% of students are eligible to participate in the federal free and reduced price meal program and 1.4% of students are English language learners.

In 2013, the authors developed and implemented a free, weeklong summer civics institute for fifth – ninth grades called Youth Act (pseudonym). As an annual summer event, Youth Act seeks to develop young people's civic and political competence and strengthen their community and political engagement through Youth Act action civics projects (Blevins & LeCompte, 2015; Blevins et al., 2018). In Spring 2019, the authors took the Youth Act curriculum to a rural community, implemented with 40 students in the 5th grade. Students were assigned to six small groups to identify a civics-related issue in their community and carry out an inquiry project that culminated in a public presentation of their recommendations. The case includes all 5th-grade students and their two teachers at a rural elementary school.

The action civics project the students completed were a result of working through the action civics inquiry cycle. This inquiry cycle is based on Generation Citizen's Advocacy Hourglass (2014). Students were divided into groups based on survey results that assessed their interest in an array of community issues. Next, students identified issues within their community by researching current events in local newspapers. Participants brainstormed what they loved about their community and what they wanted to improve. From their list of identified community issues, the groups reached a consensus and identified a group topic to explore further. Each group explored their community issue, developed guiding questions and located people relevant to their issue they could contact for more information. After gathering their research, group members developed a plan of action to address their community issue. The final step was to share their plan and research with their teachers, peers, and community members.

Table 1
Action Civics Project Group Topics

Group 1	Group 2	Group 3	Group 4	Group 5	Group 6
Damage from storms (tornados)	Auto theft	Child abuse	Drug and alcohol abuse	Keeping a hospital in the county	Community growth

Data Sources

The three primary data sources (Merriam, 1998) collected included student interviews, student inquiry projects, and fieldnotes. Five students were randomly selected for semi-structured interviews at the end of the week-long curriculum cycle. Additionally, all students completed pre-and post-surveys. Student artifacts consisted of daily exit tickets and student packets to guide them through the action civics inquiry cycle. Our analytic approach was based on Creswell and Poth's (2018) data analysis spiral where "the researcher engages in the process of moving in analytic circles rather than using a fixed linear approach" (p. 185). A constant comparative method (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) was also used to analyze and code data according to our theoretical framework rooted in action civics and the civic imagination (Baiocchi et al., 2014). Our analysis led to the following findings.

Findings

Three primary findings emerged from our data which included the development of solidarity, shared problem-solving, and engaging in challenging discussions. In the following sections, we describe our results in detail. Across these findings, we found that solidarity happens when people in a community come together to exchange cultural perspectives, discuss, council, and debate common problems. When people discuss complex issues and determine viable options, they engage in problem-solving. Finally, challenging discussions are not comfortable even when participants share in a geographical culture. People have strong opinions. Therefore, some give and take is necessary to achieve consensus on a solution to a community program.

Solidarity

First, we found that students' framing of citizenship and civic engagement pointed to a civic imagination emphasizing solidarity (Baiocchi et al., 2014). According to Baiocchi et al., "For imaginations centered on 'solidarity,' civil society influences the political by fostering a sense of community. Civic life requires feeling connected to others" (p. 56). Our data highlighted the ways students in this rural community used their context to make sense of civic engagement and form their understanding of what qualifies as "good" citizenship. Students consistently used forms of collective language (i.e., "our county" or "our community"). When asked what they like most about their community as an initial step in identifying a community issue, students consistently made comments such as "We help others," "They work together," or "We are all friends."

Additionally, one student noted that those affected by her group's community issue (the closing of a local hospital) impacted "anyone who comes through our county." Rather than framing the closing of a hospital as perhaps part of a nationwide or global trend (i.e., the shrinking size of rural communities), this student maintained a view that this issue was deeply personal to her community. In her interview, she commented that "Um because like say if someone's injured, they are someone have to travel so far and by the time they probably get there they are going to be in even more in danger of having a worse condition." When asked about her solution to this problem, she replied, "We are going to write a letter to the tax collector." Even at a young age, she realized that taxes support the hospital and that the community needed access to medical services. Another group of students focused on the topic of *Tornados*. They recognized that severe weather affected the whole community, not just those whose homes suffered damage but also affected jobs. Trees were blocking roads, and live electrical lines impeded transportation and safety after a storm incident. They suggested that helping others through "storm-packets." We observed the group of students researching tornadoes. On chart paper, participants noted that information from the Red Cross is essential for families to recover from such weather disasters. Their response was tangible and realistic. It was not abstract, but something that would help their

community at the moment. The students' community issues and the solutions they developed emphasized the need to work together to maintain a robust collective identity. If jobs are lost or cars are stolen, it is a communal, not an individual, problem that should be solved by the community. We are reminded that an individual's civic imagination allows one to see their political place in the world-leading them to the possibility of reimagining how they are part of redefining the political context in which they exist. Our study illustrates that individual students participating in action civics can empathize with another person(s) issue.

Problem-Solving

Our second finding focuses on how the action civics inquiry model helped students activate problem-solving through their civic imagination. Baioccchi et al. (2014) noted that a problem-solving civic imagination is similar to the solidarity civic imagination, but "the objective is not only to build solidarity but also to spur creativity and generate new ideas" (p. 64). When asked how her understanding of what a "good" citizen does change during the week, one student noted, "It proves that just because I am young, I can do way more. And that if you come together, you can accomplish what you need." During the week, students not only worked with peers to address a community issue, but they were able to present their solutions and get feedback from local community members. For example, a group of students worked on the issue of community growth. They noted in their planning documents that there "isn't enough money in the community to build homes for families." They suggested that more aid like Habitat for Humanity would allow new homes. In a second example, one group investigated the issue of car theft. We observed that they discussed that trucks are essential in rural communities because they can carry more farming supplies. Students argued that although new trucks are harder to steal, many people cannot afford a new truck so they suggested that a group of students and parents organize a fundraiser to print and distribute stickers to be put as decals on windows to warn owners to lock their vehicles. In working with their peers *and* with the local community adults, students began to imagine acting creatively with others to solve community problems (Baiocchi et al., 2014).

Challenging Discussions

Our third finding centered on the idea of difficult discussions in classroom settings. Students in this rural community quickly identified troubling issues, such as child abuse. These students chose the topic of child abuse after reading an article in the local newspaper. Through their subsequent discussions they were able to consider how they could leverage their shared histories, political ideas, and community resources. Thought the topic of child abuse may be alarming for educators, the students in this group had a great discussion with a county child protective services representative. We turn to Dewey, who posits that a democratic community dedicated to continuous self-improvement will nurture future citizens (Dewey, 1916). The presence of like-minded expert adults in the same room having a civil conversation with students is an example of the kinds of civic problem-solving that support community improvement. The students articulated that the "root cause" of child abuse in their community was, in part, mental health issues and alcoholism (Video interview). The students then used the examining evidence graphic that we provided from her civic engagement packet to work on a PowerPoint presentation that outlined her plan, which emerged from group conversations. Another group member helped coordinate and divide work by helping her peer determine what needed to be placed on their presentation slide. Another student noted how networks of support could help further the address of social issues commenting "that is many resources" which referred to the four resources the slide they created. This group of students articulated their goal in writing which included how they viewed the importance of others and having difficult conversations. They wrote, "we will prevent child abuse by educating people about it and providing information on how to contact a counselor." Our findings suggest that action civics in rural communities enhances a sense of belonging and the identity of the young community members.

Implications

After examining our findings, our analysis revealed that the student's sense of community resulting from their rural upbringing led to a clear connection between their civic imagination and civic acting. The rural nature of the students' lived experiences caused their civic imagination to be narrower than in urban contexts (Waterson & Moffa, 2016). In other words, rural civic experiences were related to those things that exist within the

community and to the ways they were shared within the group culture. What this means is that, while the rural experiences helped students better connect to community issues and create more tangible solutions to these issues than what we have seen in our work in a more urban setting, students were less likely to engage in issues related to broader social change. Rather, issues emerged from things like the stories in the local newspaper, the ways their community had been affected, and from those stories that emerged from those they had conversations with. Notably, the findings suggest a relationship to the normed political climate in which their civic imaginations are formed, as Baiocchi et al. (2014) suggests. However, a rural civic imaginary may not naturally necessarily extend to more global contexts and issues. While this is undoubtedly possible, this may be an area where explicit teaching would be helpful. However, when compared to previous studies in urban settings, the opposite is often true. Students seem to be able to articulate the global significance of something grounded in their personal experience but struggle to connect with many ways to engage with the local community (Magill et. al, 2022; Smith et. al, 2022).

Through their civic imaginations, students understood the histories of their rural community, how this affected those who lived there, and the agency they had to transform it. At the camp, students connected a sense of history, place, and personal identity to those things that they observed in their community (Mills, 1959). Student observations of the hospital, weather patterns, and child abuse inspired their civic imaginations of what was possible in their rural context. Utilizing these rural funds of knowledge were helpful in furthering the sociological and civic imaginaries (Biaocchi et. al., 2014; Mills, 1959; Moll et. al. 1992) The personal and historical relevance of the community included a sense of solidarity (Magill & Rodriguez, 2021), a desire to connect with others, and a desire for more resources, which allowed the students to see themselves attending to these conditions as they increased their civic understanding and purpose at the camp. The ability to imagine civic possibility led to a sense of ownership and agency and connected the idea of civic imagination to real possibility. This perception of agency allowed students to see the possibility for civic action through their civic engagements.

Conclusion

Through this action civics experience, students were given opportunities to develop their civic knowledge, participation skills, and attitudes while simultaneously positively impacting their community. Rural students learn social norms embedded in their day-to-day activities and relationships with family and community members. While norms vary by region and ethnicity, generally, rural children tend to be raised under traditional values that create a strong family and community bonds. These bonds can lead to feelings of conflict between staying and leaving their communities after high school, causing some students to lower educational aspirations (Corbett, 2007; Hektner, 1995; Waterson & Moffa, 2016). While many rural places show healthy democratic life (i.e., town meetings, agrarian cooperatives, and labor gatherings), we suggest rural contexts offer untapped possibilities for proactive democratic life (Waterson & Moffa, 2016). This project served as a unique way to provide rural students with the opportunity to put social studies to work in their communities (LeCompte & Blevins, 2015). Students utilized essential civic skills, including critical thinking, elaborated communication, and collaboration, essential to their lifelong role as civic actors.

Epilogue

Since the implementation of *Youth Act* at Green Elementary, the community has witnessed substantial changes. Notably, the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted regular instruction. In response, Green Elementary provided laptops and internet access to all students. Despite the hardships of the pandemic, citizens involved in Small Town's district successfully passed a large bond package to improve the schools' buildings. The multi-purpose facility is part of a 5-million-dollar bond package which will also cover the costs of additional classrooms for Career and Technical Education courses and a new cafeteria for the elementary school. When the first serious discussions on the bond initiative were held in late 2019 and early 2020, the hope—if the voters approved the measure—was to complete the project by the start of the 2021-2022 school year. Unfortunately, no one factored in the effect the COVID-19 pandemic would have. The election was pushed back from May 2020 until November 2020 but eventually passed by a margin of 626 votes (62.2 %) to 381 votes (37.8 %). Almost as soon as the ink dried on the vote canvass, the design process began in earnest, including the vetting of mostly local contractors and subcontractors. By the time the pieces of the puzzle had been gathered together, the

district had opened its doors for the 2021-2022 school year. They pulled together as a team despite the postponed election, the COVID-19 pandemic, and a brutal winter that wreaked havoc on this southern community.

Moreover, in early August 2021, they were rewarded as the first golden shovels plowed into the dirt for the official groundbreaking ceremony

(Johnson, 2021). The citizens, both youth and adult, recognize the importance of participative citizenship in their community. Teachers and administrators have requested another rendition of *Youth Act* at Green Elementary, which will happen in the Spring of 2022. Social studies education and civic participation are thriving in this rural community. It is a rural example of participatory action civics at the elementary level.

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