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Rethinking Equity and Justice in Rural Organizations: Implications for Policy and Practice

**Amy Price Azano
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On May 25, 2020, while many were socially distancing at home in the early stages of the Covid-19 pandemic, we learned of the murder of George Floyd, a 46-year-old Black father who was the first of his four siblings to attend college. His was not the only murder of a Black person by police officers during the 2020 spring and summer and, as a result, Black Lives Matter marches and rallies spread across major cities and small towns and endured for months. In response, many educational organizations, like the American Educational Research Association (AERA) and the National Rural Education Association (NREA), released public statements in support of Black families and communities and their colleagues and constituents of color. And while these statements signaled support for People of Color, many perceived these statements and initial social media acts, like #BlackoutTuesday, as performative activism and problematic allyship (Hassan, 2021).

In this policy brief, we describe the steps we took in a rural education organization to rethink equity and justice and create meaningful and sustainable change at a policy level. We begin by providing context about who we are as rural educators and scholars and how our positionalities and experiences informed our approach to engaging in equity and justice issues in rural spaces. We then introduce questions that informed our work over the past 18 months; how we responded to these questions in our organization; and offer policy and practice implications for other rural-facing organizations and institutions.

Understanding Positionalities: An Initial Step in Equity Work

The concept of positionality generally refers to one's perspective or *position* in relation to a particular social, cultural, or political context. We believe it is critical for educators, leaders, and researchers to begin with reflecting on their own social identities, professional and educational experiences as they seek to change organizational

policies and practices that advance equity and justice. It is also necessary to understand the social and political context—which, for our work, meant a moment marked by a Covid-19 pandemic deepening political divides, by a Black Lives Matter movement during the Trump and post-Trump era, by a push for and pushback against critical race theory—a context in which “rural” seemed to reinforce longstanding and negative narratives of antimodernism and resistance.

Positionality work for Amy meant critically interrogating her sense of place as a rural native, scholar, and advocate. A White cisgender woman, Amy became chair of AERA's Rural Education Special Interest Group (SIG) in Spring 2020, just a couple months before her rural hometown of about 5,000 held two Black Lives Matter rallies (Arrington, 2020)—the first in June and the second in August (Pynn, 2020) after the then-mayor published a racist Facebook post about Kamala Harris (Griffith, 2020; see also Kesslen, 2020). These events, and their related community and familial fallout, made personal these popularly contended rural narratives and prompted her to consider how she could leverage her role as SIG chair to advocate for meaningful change in the organization and in rural communities.

For Darris, a Black queer cisgender man, his positionality is symbolized in part by his role as the SIG's chair for diversity, equity, and inclusion. Throughout 2020, he saw a significant response from organizations, colleges and universities, and corporations condemning racism but often thought about how these same organizations, institutions, and corporations continue to perpetuate and reinforce anti-blackness and other intersecting forms of oppression through their practices and policies. While skeptical of how statements would be followed by action from these organizations, colleges and universities, and corporations, Darris felt like this was an important opportunity to collaborate with rural education scholars, leaders, and students to discuss *and* address inequities and injustices within a rural context.

Guiding Questions

Our combined experiences and positionalities led to a series of questions we collectively asked of ourselves and of our leadership roles in the Rural Education SIG. In this section, we draw upon organizational theories (e.g., Bolman & Deal, 2017; Chesler & Crowfoot, 1989) and broaden our guiding questions to be applicable to other rural organizers, educational leaders, and educators in schools, districts, colleges, and universities seeking to address justice, equity, inclusion, and diversity through changing policies and practices. As a means of reflection on what we've done and intend to continue, we share strategic steps taken in response to the questions and to ensure that our organization's commitment goes deeper than surface-level activism. In other words, how can we translate an abstract concept like "equity" into actionable steps? We aim here to share lessons learned in our attempts to create sustainable change toward equity in our academic group so that others, including educators and leaders of schools, districts, and institutions of higher education, wishing to do the same might consider this as a footprint for one way forward.

Guiding Question 1: What do the symbols and practices of a rural organization, school, or institution communicate about its culture?

During the social and political context we've described, historical statues and other symbols, notably the Confederate flag, took on perhaps even greater meaning. As we embarked on our work, it was important to consider the role rurality played in relation to the symbols and practices of our organization, namely our governing documents. With an aim of advancing equity, our first act was to establish a community of leaders who could direct our organization's efforts. Our SIG's leadership put out a call to its membership to join an ad-hoc committee on diversity, equity, and inclusion. The leadership team, led by Amy as chair, asked Darris, a longtime SIG member who addresses issues of equity in his rural education research, to lead the committee.

As chair, Darris convened the committee and asked members ahead of their first meeting to engage in a reading by D-L Stewart (2017), "The Language of Appeasement," in which Stewart compares diversity and inclusion to equity and social justice. Stewart (2017) argues that "by substituting diversity and inclusion rhetoric for transformative efforts to

promote equity and justice, HWIs (historically white institutions) have appeased their constituents and avoided recognizable institutional change" (para. 11). Equity and justice, by contrast, demand institutional and systemic change (e.g., policies, practices, procedures, and institutional culture and values) that make them an important "yardstick by which leaders measure progress instead of merely diversity and inclusion" (para. 12). While the ad-hoc committee considered diversity and inclusion, we ensured equity and justice were centered in our work.

Drawing upon Stewart's (2017) work, the committee considered the symbols and practices and if and how they reflect the aims and values of the organization. To that end, they first reviewed the organization's bylaws to consider ways in which to better incorporate priorities related to justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion in the guiding document. In addition to the bylaws, our group also prioritized these initiatives, specifically in research with and for historically marginalized groups in a graduate fellowship competition and in its dissertation awards. Our newsletter created a column on intersectionality and has featured Scholars of Color.

Beyond interrogating mascots and external or obvious symbols, organizations can examine governing documents to ask if and how they ensure equity. For example, many schools have interrogated dress codes with regard to gender and People of Color, or symbols teachers are or are not allowed to showcase in their classrooms (e.g., Pride flags). In this vein, we encourage you to consider:

- What symbols and artifacts are in your school, community, or organization?
- What do these symbols and artifacts communicate about *who* belongs in this space?
- How could removing, rethinking, or repurposing these artifacts promote a new vision in your organization aimed at equity and justice?

Guiding Question 2: How does the structure of your organization, school, district, college, or university promote equity and justice, and how does rurality contextualize these structures?

In response to the second guiding question, we proposed structural changes to the AERA Rural Education SIG. Darris was serving as chair for an ad-hoc committee. After conducting a review of the bylaws over several months, the committee proposed that the organization create a permanent and elected

position for a Justice, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (JEDI) Chair. An elected position would ensure the sustainability of these efforts and also ensure that the JEDI chair would serve as a member of the executive committee (along with the SIG chair, secretary/treasurer, and program co-chairs). As part of this recommendation, the JEDI chair would lead a committee of scholars committed to equity and justice in rural education. This policy change signals an enduring commitment for promoting justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion in our programming, policies, communication, nomination and award processes, including recognizing individuals and/or groups who advance these priorities.

An important step in this process was engaging the full organization and creating buy-in and relevancy for the work. Darris and Amy shared the proposal with members to invite feedback ahead of our annual meeting, and incorporated important revisions prior to seeking approval from the governing organization. For example, we initially proposed that the JEDI chair serve a three-year term but learned from feedback that the length of that commitment could be taxing, especially for Scholars of Color who are often asked and expected to lead similar efforts in their professional roles, resulting in a change in the term to two years. Another step we are taking is the development of “Guiding Principles for Justice, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion,” an effort being led by JEDI committee member, Dr. Carolyn Colvin. The intent of the guiding principles are to ensure justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion initiatives do not solely rest with the JEDI Chair and Committee. Instead, all members, committees, and leaders of the organization are actively working to advance justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion.

For other rural organizations wanting to prioritize equity and justice work, we encourage you to consider the existing structures of your school, district, or institution of higher education and how current structures might advance justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion—or reinforce and reproduce classism, racism, ableism, sexism, and other forms of oppression. We provide the following questions for consideration:

- How can you engage key stakeholders and constituents to create an opportunity for investment in potential changes?
- How might structural changes create greater opportunities for engagement from historically minoritized members in your organization or institution?

- How can your organization ensure that justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion efforts do not solely rest with minoritized communities or a single committee, but instead actively engage all members of the organization in efforts to advance justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion through policies and practices?

Guiding Question 3: How do we make sense of the unearned benefits or disadvantages related to our intersecting rural identities, and how do these forms of oppression (e.g., anti-black racism, classism, homophobia, heteronormativity, ableism) materialize in teaching, research, and collaborations?

In our work, we sought to address this question by organizing a webinar series aimed at advancing equity and learning from a diverse group of scholars. We convened a planning committee, invited participation, and solicited funds. We were cognizant of wanting to leverage diverse voices without exacting a toll on Scholars of Color. Financial support allowed us to compensate our speakers and facilitators, most of whom were People of Color, to acknowledge the burden of their service. The first webinar began with a discussion addressing equity writ large in rural spaces, followed by webinars focused on Black Rural Education, Indigenous Rural Education, and Latinx Rural Education. The final webinar in the series examined how issues of equity relate to policy, practice, and partnerships in rural education (see <https://www.aera.net/SIG102/Rural-Education> to view webinars).

While we believe these webinars were a good starting place, we readily recognize the need for more dialogue focused on intersectionalities of rural identities and systems of oppression and on other groups not included in the inaugural series, such as lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer people, transgender people, and people with disabilities in rural contexts. We also learned there was a need to explore the interrelated concepts of diversity, equity, and rurality at Historically Black Colleges and Universities, at community colleges, as well as other post-secondary contexts. We learned about the challenges of access for Black youth into gifted programs and about the importance of trust—or *confianza*—between Latinx families and their community schools.

We learned a great deal—mostly that there is much more to be learned and that we must prioritize

matters of justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion if we indeed hope to advance equity and justice in rural education. Currently, we are partnering with the National Rural Education Association to host the second webinar series in Spring 2022. We believe the partnership will build capacity for bringing together rural education researchers, rural K-12 educators and administrators, and rural college educators and administrators to engage in learning and dialogue about equity and justice in rural education.

This final question may be at the crux of this work in rural contexts. “White privilege” and “critical race theory” have unnecessarily become divisive concepts. However we choose to name and discuss these concepts, we must engage with the ways our intersecting systems of oppression shape the experiences and outcomes of rural learners, educators, and leaders. And while this question (and perhaps the previous two) may seem universal, we argue they are nuanced when considering rural contexts. Identifying as a transgender person or a person with a physical disability in a rural community, for example, may prove contextually very different than for individuals in nonrural contexts. Leaders must consider:

- How do organizations (their structure, policies, symbols, curricula, etc.) privilege or

limit complex and intersecting rural identities?

- Relatedly, how can educators better recognize the rich experiences, identities, and knowledge of rural Communities of Color?
- What learning opportunities are available in your organization to advance justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion through practice and policy?
- How can your group further disrupt monolithic portrayals of rural schools and communities?

Concluding Thoughts

We are having what feels like a watershed moment in rural education. There remains deep division politically in rural places and this division is informed by histories of marginalization, minoritization, and dispossession. But there is also hope. During our webinar series on Indigenous rural education, we learned about Osage ribbon work as a metaphor for settler-colonial entanglements (Hayman et al., 2018). The notion of entanglements stuck with us—the idea that we all have complicated identities and histories, that we are all entangled in this work, and that we can create new metaphors to move us forward.

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