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“It’s the Commonwealth's attempt to censor . . . what we teach”: Anti-LGBTQIA2S+ educational policy influences on rural secondary ELA teacher practices

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“It’s the Commonwealth's attempt to censor . . . what we teach”: Anti-LGBTQIA2S+ educational policy influences on rural secondary ELA teacher practices

Author Biography
A product of rural public schools, Josh Thompson is a queer Appalachian educator, scholar, and writer. He is currently a PhD student in the English Education program at Virginia Tech. His research and scholarship center on rural education, adolescent literacy, and the experiences, needs, hopes, and dreams of rural queer youth.

Clint Whitten is a doctoral candidate in Foundations of Education at Virginia Tech with a focus on the intersections of Queerness and rurality. He has taught middle school English, creative writing, and theatre and currently teaches a social educational foundations course at Virginia Tech. He also helps implement youth initiatives at the Center for Rural Education at Virginia Tech.

Karin Kaerwer is a doctoral candidate in Foundations of Education at Virginia Tech, a lecturer at Roanoke College, and a former elementary school teacher. Her research interests include recruiting and retaining teachers of color into PK-16 settings through pipeline programs, culturally relevant and responsive pedagogical practices, rural education, and education policy.

Abstract
The shift in political landscape in Virginia from former Democratic Governor Ralph Northam to current Republican Governor Glen Youngkin influenced educational policies in the commonwealth. Waving the banner of parental rights, the Youngkin administration began targeting LGBTQIA2S+ students and educators through legislation and policies such as SB 656 and Model Policies on Ensuring Privacy, Dignity, and Respect for All Students and Parents in Virginia’s Public Schools. To understand the influence on rural school districts, this study asked how rural secondary English Language Arts educators understand and respond to these anti-LGBTQIA2S+ policies as well as the ways in which those educators feel that those policies influence the climate of their classrooms. Using a qualitative questionnaire and semi-structured interviews, we sought input from secondary English Language Arts teachers in one entirely rural region of Virginia. This study produced four findings: differing understandings and implementation of policies, curricular control, effects on student-teacher relationships, and humanizing practices. We provide a call-to-action and recommendations for classroom educators.

Keywords
educational policy, rural, secondary English Language Arts, LGBTQIA2S+, queer theory, humanizing practices

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The political shift in leadership in Virginia between former Democratic Governor Ralph Northam and current Republican Governor Glenn Youngkin transformed the educational landscape under the guise of ensuring parental rights. As Governor Youngkin began shifting the political educational agenda to align with a more conservative, parent-centric model, school districts began removing symbols of LGBTQIA2S+ representation (e.g., flags, stickers), indexing classroom libraries for “sexually explicit” content, and adopting the Virginia Department of Education’s (VDOE) model policies for the treatment of transgender youth, which operate under the guise of ensuring respect for all students. Governor Youngkin quickly restructured the work of the Northam administration, shifting the focus from protecting transgender youth to protecting the privacy and dignity for “all students and parents.” A look at the titles of each set of policies demonstrates this change: the Youngkin 2022 Model Policies on Ensuring Privacy, Dignity, and Respect for All Students and Parents in Virginia’s Public Schools replaced the 2020 Model Policies for the Treatment of Transgender Students in Virginia’s Public Schools implemented by former Governor Northam.

Figure 1 situates our study within sociopolitical and legislative contexts. On the left, a timeline delineates the process of current educational policies in Virginia focused on the treatment of transgender students. It describes the initial 2020 directive from the Virginia General Assembly to the VDOE to develop evidence-based model policies for the treatment of transgender and nonbinary students in schools. From there, the timeline shows the progression of this mandate as it is enacted first by Governor Northam’s administration and then revised under Governor Youngkin’s administration. On the right, we have added commentary to demonstrate the erasure of LGBTQIA2S+ voices, knowledge, and people. As noted, Governor Youngkin’s revised policies all but ignored over 70,000 dissenting comments and completely rewrote
previous policies, arguably deviating from the initial 2020 mandate. We began developing this research while the Youngkin administration revised the 2022 model policies.

As former educators who taught in rural and rural-serving public schools, we are familiar with the influence of state and local policies on practices, curricula, and safety. Josh is a cisgender, queer former high school English Language Arts (ELA) educator; Clint is a cisgender, queer former middle school ELA teacher; and Karin is a cisgender, straight former elementary school educator. We are all bound by a commitment to liberatory practices in schools that support marginalized students. In our rural and rural-serving classrooms, numerous students have...
come out in their writing and explored queer narratives; in fact, we believe that ELA classrooms are especially suited to becoming safe spaces for queer youth to read and write about themselves. Based on our positionalities and the clear shift in state-level sociopolitical educational ideologies, we asked the following two research questions:

1. How do rural secondary ELA teachers understand and respond to educational legislation and policies focused on LGBTQIA2S+ topics within their curriculum and practice?
2. In what ways do rural secondary ELA teachers feel that those pieces of legislation and policies influence the climate of their classrooms?

**Literature Review**

The literature review is split into three sections to fully encapsulate the three components of the scope of this research.

**Rural LGBTQIA2S+ Students’ Experiences**

LGBTQIA2S+ youth have a complex existence in schools. Often, as compared to their urban counterparts, rural queer youth deal with greater risks of verbal and physical victimization and have fewer LGBTQIA2S+-related resources and supports (Kosciw et. al., 2022; Palmer, 2012). Additionally, rural queer youth may not see themselves represented in curricula and libraries (Page, 2017); moreover, they may not see queer visibility in their rural communities, such as a Pride flag being displayed at a local coffee shop or a Pride festival happening downtown (Whitten, 2023). Often rural LGBTQIA2S+ youth lack adults who are prepared and aware of supportive resources (Blackburn & Thomas, 2019). Thomas (2022) argued,

Research and policy consistently overlook rural youth in general and rural LGBTQ+ youth particularly, even as rural LGBTQ+ youth cite limited access to resources and support, lack of knowledgeable and affirming adults in school spaces, and continued
school and community exclusion as central factors to their increased levels of victimization over urban and suburban students. (p. 612)

Across place (e.g., rural, suburban, urban), these rates of victimization and realities of being rejected also lead LGBTQIA2S+ youth through a school-to-prison pipeline (Snapp et al., 2015). These moments may be heightened in rural communities where people know each other more closely (e.g., a gay youth may feel even more hesitant to come out because of how well school personnel knows his family). These factors for rural LGBTQIA2S+ youth connect with the larger LGBTQIA2S+ youth narrative: queer youth face mental health challenges and often consider unaliving themselves (The Trevor Project, 2022). Despite these challenges, rural queer youth continue to exist.

**Rural ELA Educators**

We chose to focus this study on rural ELA educators because they may uniquely engage with place-based pedagogies and queer discourses. Azano et al. (2021) emphasized the interdisciplinary and multi-grade-level importance of rural literacies when it comes to shaping rural identities (p. 62). Specifically, however, ELA classrooms may be a space where youth get to write, read, and do research on their and others’ identities. Bishop’s (1990) metaphor of mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors presents a way an ELA teacher may be already creating space for youth to engage with place and identity in the classroom. As Bishop explained, texts can allow readers to explore identity. For instance, a book featuring a queer protagonist serves as a mirror for a queer reader, thereby affirming the student’s identity.

Unfortunately, while ELA by nature provides spaces for queer students to explore their identities, rural ELA teachers noted feeling fearful of potential community, parent, and administrative backlash when asked about LGBTQIA2S+ inclusion in their curricula (Page,
2017). This fact is particularly important to a rural ELA teacher’s sense of belonging. Wynhoff Olsen et al. (2022) explored the influences of negative power dynamics within rural communities and noted the long-lasting effects those dynamics can have on an educator’s rural sense of belonging (RSOB). ELA teachers in rural schools who wish to incorporate diverse texts and free writing while also feeling hesitant due to fear of community and/or harmful policies may feel even greater isolation. Relatedly, rural LGBTQIA2S+ students could experience the same effects on their own RSOB.

**Policy Analysis**

Schooling, as a public good, undergirds U.S. democracy and is therefore subject to societal pressures and politics. Societal values, especially those attributed to the group in political power, influence educational policies. Prunty (1984) stated, “policy is the ‘authoritarian allocation of values’ . . . and requires us to consider not only whose values are represented in policy, but also how these values have become institutionalized” (p. 136). Critical policy analysis diverges from traditional policy analysis in its aim to “expose the sources of domination, repression, and exploitation that are entrenched in, and legitimated by, education policy” (Prunty, p. 136). Analyzing policy and its surrounding discourse through critical theory elucidates hegemonic strongholds on education, providing a starting point for challenging policy and suggesting more equitable alternatives.

Weaver-Hightower (2008) offered an ecology metaphor to critically analyze policy. He stated, “policy ecology consists of the policy itself along with all of the texts, histories, people, places, groups, traditions, economic and political conditions, institutions, and relationships that affect it or that it affects” (p.155). Therefore, along with textual analysis, a study of varying types of discourse surrounding a policy offers a clearer picture of the policy’s nuance. A policy
ecology analysis of *Model Policies on Ensuring Privacy, Dignity, and Respect for All Students and Parents in Virginia’s Public Schools* (2021, 2022, 2023) reveals an unraveling story of ideological hegemony (Giroux, 2020) deployed by neoconservative politicians in power. Neoconservative values often align with evangelical Christian values; however, they are not necessarily synonymous. For example, the phrase “Make America Great Again” imbibes neoconservative values, defining “traditional” as nuclear family structures and affording civil rights only to a white, cisgender, heteronormative population.

**Conceptual Framework**

School climate, classroom climate, and student-teacher relationships affect student academic achievement, social-emotional development, and engagement (Osterman, 2000; Reyes et al., 2012; Wentzel, 2022). Underpinning these factors is a sense of belonging (Osterman, 2000). Strayhorn (2019) defined a sense of belonging as a student’s “perceived social support [in school], a feeling or sensation of connectedness, and the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the campus community or others on campus such as faculty, staff, and peers” (p. 3). Students who have a greater sense of belonging perform better academically and have better mental health outcomes (Reyes et al., 2012; Wentzel, 2022). Developing a rural salience, Wynhoff Olsen et al. (2022) articulated a RSOB as a student’s identification or association with rurality, providing a framework for understanding acceptance and tensions and how these factors influence a student’s sense of self, among other factors.

For rural LGBTQIA2S+ students, district policies as well as state legislation and policies are another factor that can shape their sense of belonging. Recent anti-LGBTQIA2S+ policies aim to control curriculum and student bodies. Queer studies demonstrates how
cis heternormativity normalizes cisheterosexuality while suppressing LGBTQIA2S+ people and ways of knowing (e.g., Ahmed, 2006; Berlant & Warner, 1995). By perpetuating cis heternormativity, these policies have the potential to engender the erasure (Eppl ey, 2011) of LGBTQIA2S+ students.

**Methods**

For this study, we selected ELA educators because queer students have reported that ELA classes and teachers have been some of the greatest supports (Kosciw et al., 2022). Moreover, we chose secondary ELA educators because adolescence is a significant period of identity, sexual, and emotional development. Finally, we intentionally selected to study rural educators because, oftentimes, legislation and policies fail to recognize contextual place-based realities. Brenner’s (2023) Rural Critical Policy Analysis (RCPA) emphasized the need for educational policies to be analyzed through their impact on rural spaces. RCPA challenges the assumptions of place neutrality, seeks to analyze how rurality is defined, calls for a distributive analysis, and addresses issues related to “fixing” rural education. As Brenner explained,

> [O]ften times “rural” policies are conceived and implemented by metro-centric policy makers who aim to fix what is deficit or lacking in rural schools, whether or not rural educators and families see the issue as a challenge, have the resources to implement the policy, or in ways that ignore the realities of rural contexts. (p. 72)

This framework generates the need for educators, stakeholders, and researchers to understand how place may influence these anti-LGBTQIAS+ policies as well as policy implementation’s effects on place.

To examine rural salience, we purposefully selected school districts in one entirely rural region of Virginia. The regional classification is determined by the VDOE, and we used
designations from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) to define rural. NCES designated all districts in this study as either rural distant or rural remote.

Data collection involved a voluntary, anonymous qualitative questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. To investigate how ELA educators might understand and respond to these questions, we conducted cognitive interviews (Hofmeyer et al., 2015) with four current or former ELA teachers. As Hofmeyer et al. (2015) explained, cognitive interviewing is “a pretesting technique or diagnostic tool that explores processes respondents use to understand and attribute meaning and to identify any problematic wording of questions” (p. 263). In this process, we used teachers’ verbal and non-verbal language to test the trustworthiness of our questionnaire. We revised questions based on the data from these cognitive interviews.

In March 2023, we emailed district superintendents, assistant superintendents, and ELA curriculum directors explaining the research study and requesting that they share the included questionnaire link with the secondary ELA educators in their schools. The questionnaire asked educators to describe contemporary LGBTQIA2S+-related polices affecting schools in Virginia and any LGBTQIA2S+-related policies their school districts had implemented in the past three years. Then, educators responded to questions asking them to elaborate on how these policies have influenced their teaching practices, their comfort level about including LGBTQIA2S+ topics in their classrooms, how LGBTQIA2S+ topics show up in their classrooms, and how their relationships with students have been affected by these policies.

At the end of the questionnaire, educators had the option to indicate their willingness to take part in a fifteen-to-twenty-minute semi-structured interview by including their name and email address. We conducted interviews via Zoom, and all were recorded with consent.
We experienced issues in obtaining responses to our questionnaire and wondered about possible causes: if district administrators were sharing it with teachers or if teachers were receiving the questionnaire and choosing not to participate—and how much of this difficulty may have been the result of heteronormative gatekeeping (Ryan & Hermann-Wilmarth, 2020) and/or a chilling effect from the anti-LGBTQIA2S+ policies. Therefore, we also shared the questionnaire in several local queer advocacy Facebook groups as well as a state organization for ELA teachers in hopes of reaching educators through means outside of school. In total, we received eight responses and conducted one interview. While the single interview might not be representative, we retained it in our data analysis because the teacher expressed important similarities to the themes found in the questionnaire.

Data analysis first began with us selecting a random response to inductively code separately before discussing our analyses together to calibrate ourselves. Then, we inductively coded questionnaire responses and the interview transcript separately before coming together to discuss, during which we asked critical questions about heteronormative influences, teacher responses to educational policies, and their reports of students’ sense of belonging.

**Findings**

This study produced four findings: differing interpretations and implementation of policies, curricular control, effects on student-teacher relationships, and humanizing practices. We elaborate on each in the following sections.

**Differing Interpretations and Implementation of Policies**

Teachers experience the effects of educational policies every day, yet vague policies can create confusion and dissimilar implementation across districts, schools, and individual
classrooms. Results indicated that educators have differing interpretations of LGBTQIA2S+-related educational policies.

Five educators demonstrated considerable knowledge of LGBTQIA2S+-related policies, including analyses of the power dynamics at play. One respondent in particular noted:

We must have parental consent to call a student by the pronouns with which they identify, or use a non-given name, even casually in the classroom. (I understand that may be necessary for legal documents like report cards.) Of course, plenty of students go by a preferred nickname; this is specifically an anti-trans policy.

The policy discussed here requires school personnel to obtain formal parental consent before using a student’s name and pronouns; as other respondents specified, this consent is only needed for students whose pronouns do not fit the gender listed in the student information system. This teacher understands that this consent is needed for certain documents (e.g., report cards, diplomas) and, in doing so, identifies an exception to this policy, one that could be queer affirming if enforced in that manner. Indeed, school personnel could refer to a student by their name and pronouns in casual conversation as well as more formal settings, like meetings with administrators, leaving the parental consent for legal documents. However, as this educator specifically names, this policy is transphobic in its design and execution.

Conversely, other responses suggested a lack of awareness of policies. For instance, one educator shared that they did not understand changes made to the gender-neutral bathroom policy at the beginning of the school year. They showed students the location of the bathrooms, and later, the students “were scolded for using it.” This resulted in the teacher having to meet with an administrator to discuss “proper protocol.” Additionally, a second-year educator wrote that they were not aware of any policies affecting their teaching practices. Both examples...
illustrate the differing levels of understanding about educational policies and emphasize the importance of professional development about these policies.

Educators also indicated differing understandings and implementation of policies. One bill in particular—SB 656—drew teachers’ attention. In summary, SB 656 required all Virginia school boards to develop policies that ensure parental notification of any instructional materials that include sexually explicit content, allow parents to review said materials, and require educators to provide alternative materials upon parental request. Three educators noted that this policy applies to instructional materials featuring LGBTQIA2S+ people and topics; however, their responses revealed uneven interpretations and implementation. One educator indicated that what is deemed as sexually explicit “would, of course, include any and all LGBTQ+ themed literature,” while another educator acknowledged that “sexually explicit content” is “often defined as any sexual activity between homosexual identifying characters” (emphasis added). Yet still, a third educator clarified that, though SB 656 is “clearly targeted at LGBTQ+ literature,” the bill does not explicitly define it as such. Therefore, her school district requires teachers to remove instructional materials that include “overt sex scenes and similar.” These responses suggest that rural LGBTQIA2S+ students in these districts experience different effects from these policies.

Curricular Control

Educators indicated that these policies resulted in various forms of curricular control related to LGBTQIA2S+ topics, especially by limiting classroom texts and conversations, albeit to varying degrees. Several teachers specifically named forms of censorship, including SB 656. Regardless of how the policy was implemented, every educator referred to these practices as either “book banning” or “censorship.” Importantly, one teacher named the policy’s perpetuation...
of the cisheteronormative hegemonic bloc: “It's the Commonwealth's attempt to censor (or allow parents to censor) what we teach.”

Second, nearly every respondent mentioned that classroom conversations were limited. Five educators cited fear of parental and/or community pushback. Only one educator commented that she felt “fairly comfortable” bringing up these topics in class; she was also the only teacher to suggest that her “very culturally inclusive [classroom] library” was not impacted by censorship efforts. Granted, she self-identified as a 56+-year-old, female, white, heterosexual educator from a rural area who lives in the community in which she teaches and who has been teaching for twenty years. These various identities grant her certain privileges that other respondents may not have.

Though distinct, these two forms of curricular control interlock in significant ways (Au, 2009). Regarding her comfort level around including LGBTQIA2S+ topics in her classroom, one educator explained, “Unless it was related to an article or something we're reading, I wouldn't bring it up.” Yet when restrictive policies intentionally exclude LGBTQIA2S+ books—by requiring parental approval, through explicit censorship of individual texts, or via a chilling effect in which teachers monitor their actions for fear of pushback—there are no texts allowing educators to have these conversations in class. Likewise, if curricula are stripped of any mention of LGBTQIA2S+ topics, issues, and people, educators lose any ability to justify text selection based on its direct connection to standards of learning.

Mayo (2021) specified how conservative advocacy groups aim to erode protections for transgender students by lobbying for the passage of antitrans legislation and policies. These groups prioritize parental rights over the rights of transgender, nonbinary, and gender-expansive students. Mayo contended that, though these groups may truly advocate for parental rights, they
at least also advocate for the eradication of LGBTQIA2S+ rights, especially since they promote only the rights of certain conservative, primarily Evangelical parents (p. 370). This emphasis on parental rights pervaded questionnaire responses with several educators noting particular fears regarding potential backlash. Page (2017) identified this hesitancy as a trend among rural teachers incorporating queer literature in their ELA classes due to having fewer resources and feeling more vulnerable because of less anonymity in small towns and rural schools.

Effects on Student-Teacher Relationships

Three educators discussed ways in which their relationships with students have been affected by these policies. One educator reported that the policies limit the books and discussions they can have with students. This statement emphasizes yet another impact of curricular control. Classroom texts and discussions go beyond mere curriculum: they also provide ways for educators to connect with students. By limiting books and conversations, these policies also limit a teacher’s ability to develop relationships with students.

Other educators explained ways in which the policies put them in difficult situations. Tom, a self-identified gay teacher who we interviewed, spoke to the dangers of educational policy that forces educators to out a transgender, nonbinary, or gender-expansive student to their parents. Tom described how it runs counter to their “own personal beliefs and morals.” Another educator shared the aforementioned story in which their lack of understanding of the school’s updated gender-neutral bathroom policy resulted in students being punished. This educator explained that students “had to meet with administrators and discuss their gender and their need for the restroom, where they were told they were safe in the bathrooms even if they didn’t feel safe and weren’t in bathrooms that align with their gender.” This teacher referred to these
comments from administrators as gaslighting and wondered if those students felt betrayed by
them.

Lastly, an educator who is also the gay-straight alliance (GSA) sponsor detailed how
policies affected their relationship with students in this extra-curricular capacity. They used to
take part in discussions—for example, answering questions that GSA student leadership had
trouble responding to—but now, out of fear of being labeled as indoctrinating students, this
educator no longer engages in meetings. They are only physically present because they no longer
feel that they can participate due to these LGBTQIA2S+-focused policies.

Humanizing Practices

Nearly every educator mentioned some form of humanizing practices, either ones that
they want to enact or ones that they actively utilized at the time of the study. Taken together,
these educators shared a list of needed schoolwide physical, emotional, and mental supports for
students: access to mental health services—without parental knowledge, if necessary; intolerance
for hate speech; unobstructed access to gender-neutral bathrooms; LGBTQIA2S+-inclusive sex
education; and teachers who are all trained in LGBTQIA2S+-supportive practices.

Furthermore, some educators explained that they would include texts featuring queer
characters and topics if it were not for the policies. However, other educators shared ways in
which they subvert these policies in order to support queer youth. For example, teachers used
independent reading and freewriting as instructional practices that offer students avenues for
expressing themselves and incorporating queer themes and issues into their learning if they
choose to do so. The thought behind these decisions was that, because students bring up
LGBTQIA2S+ topics, they are permissible in the classroom. Additionally, Tom noted that some
teachers in their district found a way to subvert a district policy banning teachers wearing Pride-
flag-themed clothing and accessories as well as any classroom decorations that include rainbows (e.g., safe space stickers). Tom shared that these educators found stickers that circumvented board policy, explaining the intent of inclusive, humanizing practices: “So they’re not necessarily breaking the rules, but they are ensuring their students that come into the classroom that it’s a safe space.”

Finally, three educators indicated particular resistance to policy implementation. One teacher described that they continued to support students as they always have, suggesting that the policies do not affect them at all, at least in some regard. Additionally, other educators shared how they outright refuse to follow district policies, citing the potential harm they could cause to queer students. Regarding a policy that requires teachers to report to administrators and counselors whenever any student comes out to them, one educator wrote, “I will never report them, and I’ve told them so.” They specified that sometimes students make “perfectly clear that they will not be safe at home if the information is given to their families.” That is reason enough for this educator to refuse to follow this policy.

**Call to Action**

Considering the theme of this issue—the ways in which reading and writing are often sites of refuge and discovery—some of the understandings gained from this study concern us. In particular, limiting curricula and classroom conversations reduces the available opportunities for refuge and discovery for students. In the case of these policies, LGBTQIA2S+ students have few to no texts, assignments, and discussions to turn to for sanctuary, support, and exploration. The question becomes, In light of this curricular control, what can rural secondary ELA educators do to support LGBTQIA2S+ students in their classrooms? Teachers could follow the lead of educators in this study and implement daily independent reading. This practice could offer
students opportunities to read books featuring queer characters and themes while protecting educators from potential administrative, community, and parental pushback. However, Schey (2019) cautioned that this practice can also make queer students and their reading choices hypervisible, potentially causing more risk for them.

Furthermore, ELA educators could incorporate more opportunities for freewriting, creative writing, or other choice in writing assignments. Parton (2022) described Literacy In Place, a website with an evolving database of rural young adult literature (YAL), a host of resources for classroom teachers and teacher educators, a blog for rural people to share their stories, and a podcast about rural YAL. As Parton suggested, ELA teachers could incorporate Literacy In Place into their writing instruction by asking students to “to describe and share their unique, individual, and nuanced rural experiences” through a variety of genres (p. 77), using mentor texts available on the website. This type of assignment offers rural LGBTQIA2S+ students spaces of refuge and discovery regarding their own unique rural queer experiences.

Lastly, considering the damaging effects of anti-LGBTQIA2S+ educational policies, educators could contemplate the value of subversive practices. Regarding refusals to enact educational policies, Achinstein and Ogawa (2006) found that, when faced with mandates that run counter to their professional beliefs, teachers engage in “principled resistance” (p. 52) when opposition to district instructional mandates is grounded in their “professional principles” (p. 52). As the educators in this study expressed, inclusive practices that honor the humanity of all students are critical. Rural queer students face many challenges, including a queerphobic sociopolitical climate, educational policies that target them, limited access to resources, and exclusion from school, community, and even family. And yet, rural queer youth continue to exist and deserve the dignity of humanizing practices. Of course, educators must weigh their decisions...
and comfort level around principled resistance; however, as educators in this study have shown, subversive practices can occur in small moves.

Educational policies that censor classroom conversations and instruction by limiting the texts and topics educators can incorporate into their teaching inherently participate in the project of erasure: removing instances of LGBTQIA2S+ topics, issues, and characters from classrooms also erases queer people, including educators and students, from schools. However, inclusive instructional practices that acknowledge the humanity of rural queer students can be part of a universal design that shows rural queer youth they belong and are supported in educational spaces. Indeed, reading and writing can be sites of refuge and discovery for rural LGBTQIA2S+ students when they disrupt cisheteronormative control and create opportunities for these students to enact their agency and live out their full, authentic selves.
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