# Adherence to themes in rural local education agency reorganization perceptions research: a meta-analytic review

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## ABSTRACT

Local education agencies (LEAs) have an active part in defining a collective identity with rural communities. To better understand how community members interact with policy in their LEA, this researcher critically evaluated completed perceptions case study survey research on rural LEA reorganization; analysis was completed through the collection of trend data by independent coders from a sample of published dissertations in ProQuest Dissertations and Theses between 2000 and 2014. Based on studying alignment with themes in Howley, Jonson, & Petrie's (2011) policy brief and Smith's (1938) research article, the perceptions of community members differ between studies. Thus, more research should be completed to determine how social geography and new media influences rural citizens' perceptions of their LEAs.

## INTRODUCTION

Using the interdisciplinary lens of educational policy and rural sociology, this meta-analysis set out to aggregate seven qualitative case studies using a mixed methods approach. Research serves a crucial role in defending rural citizen perceptions of education policy, as no community—even secluded rural towns and villages—exists in a vacuum unaffected by political rhetoric and disparagement of contemporary media. Few studies have attempted to aggregate (using a mixed-methods approach) multiple case studies on rural local education agency reorganization perceptions for analysis.
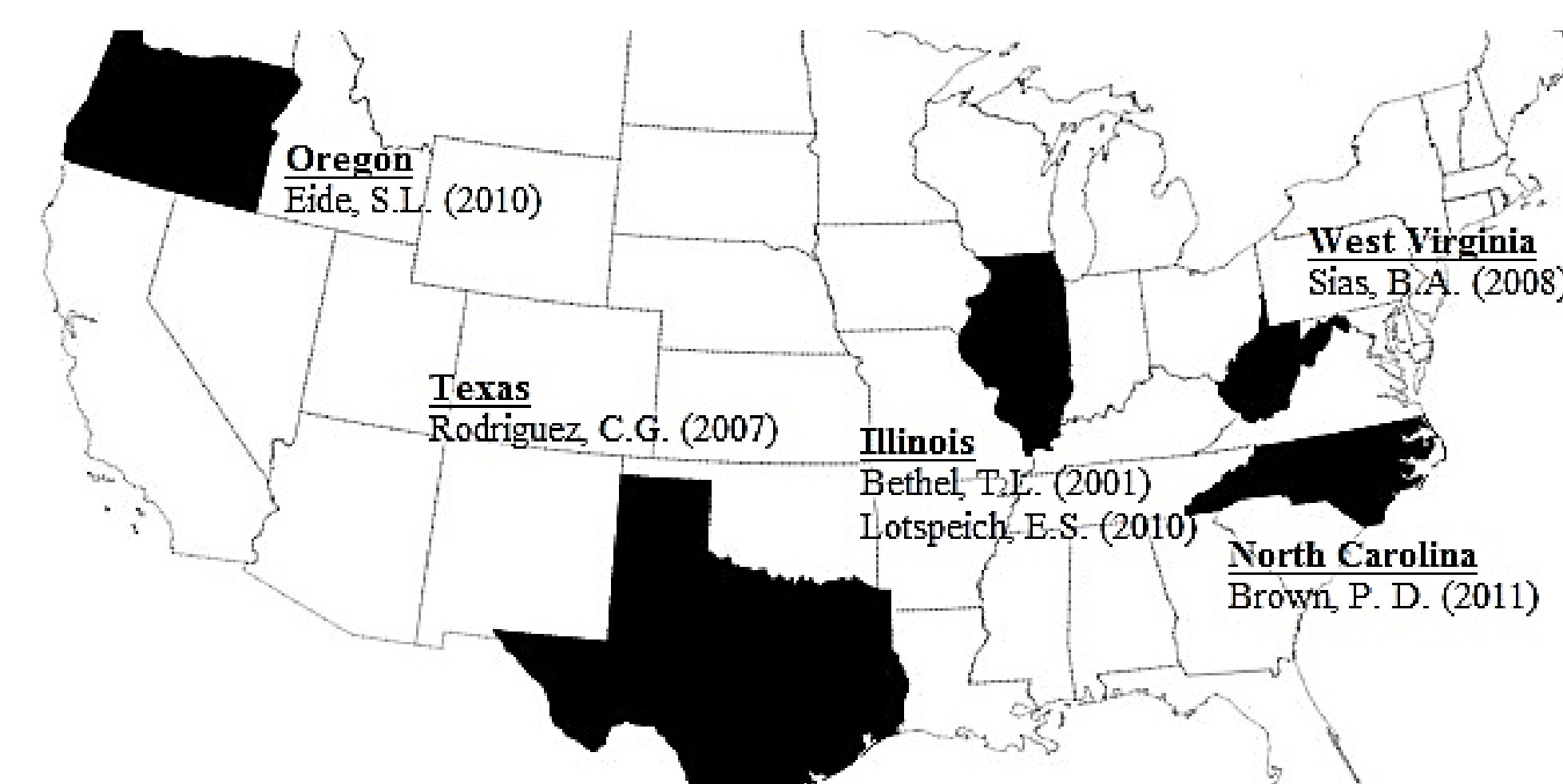
- Contemporary research on rural education often operates on a deficit model that views these institutions, with a non-urban nature, to be substandard and ill-equipped to provide students with a quality education (Sher & Tompkins, 1976).
- Middle school students in rural schools view their classrooms as unchallenging and less enjoyable in comparison to their urban and suburban peers (Gentry, Rizza, & Gable, 2001).
- Because contemporary research and youth both view their communities as substandard, "broader institutional discourses" regarding education—an urban/suburban bias—may manifest in rural education policy deliberations (Schafft & Biddle, 2013).
- Community members react to these shifts in governance—especially reorganization—in a less-positive and more-grassroots fashion if it has the possibility of altering community identity [at the cost of resources] (Warner & Lindle, 2009; Woods, 2006).
- Rural schools are perceived to be the "heart" of community identity, hosting "community meetings and events, fundraising activities, [athletics events and arts programs], and informal school-gate conversation" (Woods, 2006; Dove, 1980).
- The costs to social identity must be weighed with benefits also perceived through reorganization including cost savings and stronger course offerings (Ribchester & Edwards, 1999).

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

### Fig. 1 – Surveyed themes in mass media publications

| | Theme 1: "A sociological analysis of rural education in Louisiana" (Smith, 1938) | Theme 2: "Consolidation of schools and districts: what the research says and what it means" (Howley, Johnson, & Petrie, 2011). |
|---|---|---|
| **LEAs as a tool of social identity for the community** | LEAs, once reorganized, provide a natural center of social life for a larger community (Smith, 1938) **(-10)**. | When a LEA leaves the control of the local community, so will each community's sense of democratic identity. Within time, the town itself will take on characteristics of abandonment (Howley, Johnson, & Petrie, 2011) **(+10)**. |
| **Economies of scale in education operations and administration** | LEAs that are reorganized provide greater efficiencies with highly qualified staff. This is in addition to the new facilities and resources in which to draw from (Smith, 1938) **(-10)**. | Reorganization is highly unlikely to improve educational outcomes or reduce budgetary expenses for education as additional expenses arise in transportation (Howley, Johnson, & Petrie, 2011) **(+10)**. |
| **A more 'diverse' institution in regards to academic and extra-curricular opportunities** | Consolidated LEAs, in offering a broadened academic, extra-curriculuar, and social education of students, will provide wholesome completion amongst a wider group of peers (Smith, 1938). **(-10)**. | While consolidated districts offer a broadened program of studies and activities, students will receive less individualized attention, spend more time in transportation, and have fewer opportunities to participate in extra-curricular activities due to increased competition (Howley, Johnson, & Petrie, 2011) **(+10)**. |

1. Do two major themes identified in mass media publications, qualified with peer-reviewed research by Smith (1938) and Howley, Johnson, & Petrie (2011), exist in contemporary research on rural LEA reorganization perceptions?

2. If so, how does the research report community members perceive the benefits or complications of reorganization?

Oregon — Eide, S.L. (2010)
West Virginia — Sias, B.A. (2008)
Texas — Rodriguez, C.G. (2007)
Illinois — Bethel, T.E. (2001); Lotspeich, E.S. (2010)
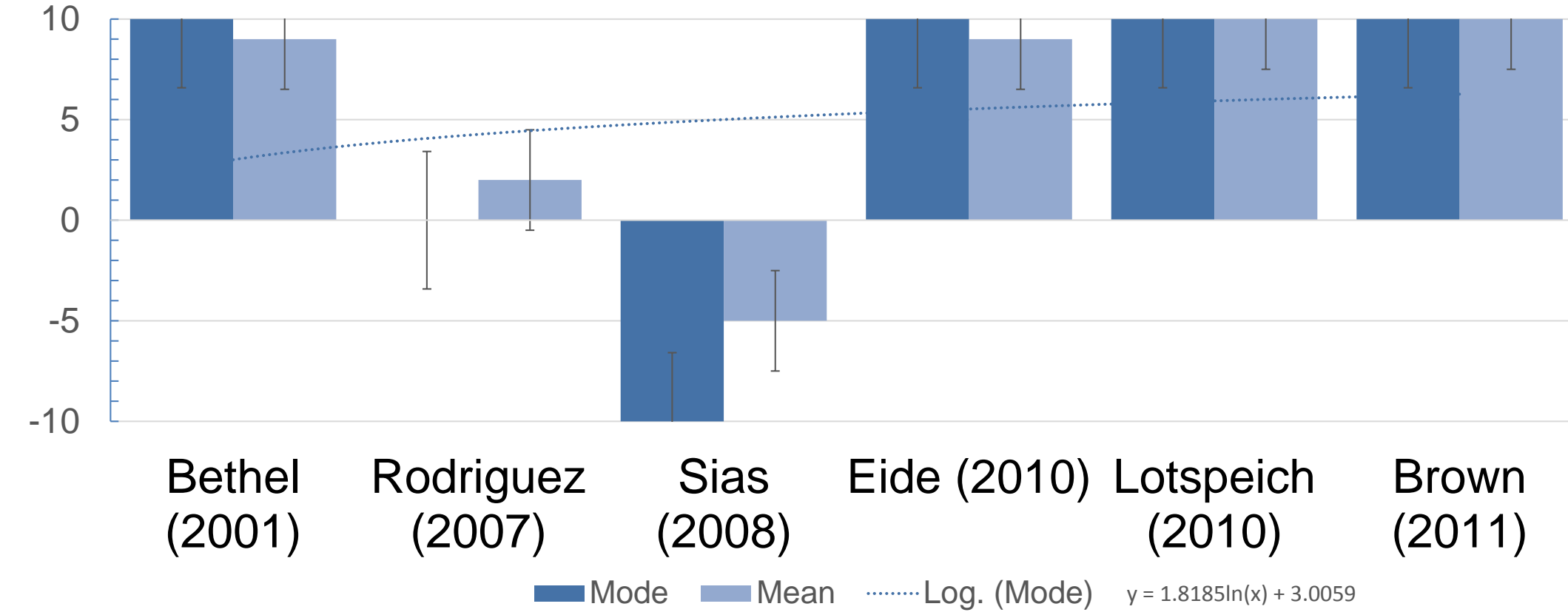North Carolina — Brown, P. D. (2011)

## METHODS

- Mass media sources surveyed indicated two main themes for community member perceptions, which were identified in the research question and qualified with a peer-reviewed document.
- In addition, published ethnographic case studies from 2000-2014 in ProQuest Dissertations and Theses were queried with Boolean operators ("case study" + "survey research"), ("reorganization" or "consolidation"), "*rural," and "*school".
- A Glassian meta-analysis approach was used to "quantitatively aggregate the results of multiple studies to arrive at an overall conclusion or summary across these studies" (Arthur, Bennett, & Huffcutt, 2001, p. 8)
- Data was coded by independent reviewers in the Educational Leadership graduate program at the University of Illinois– Springfield using a self-created rubric (with five categories at -10, -5, 0, +5, and +10) according to research question themes, and were supplied with a copy of each abstract/conclusion chapter.
- This coding was quantified using IBM SPSS 21 by modes [to determine the most recurring] and means [to determine the average], and then qualitatively examined in context.
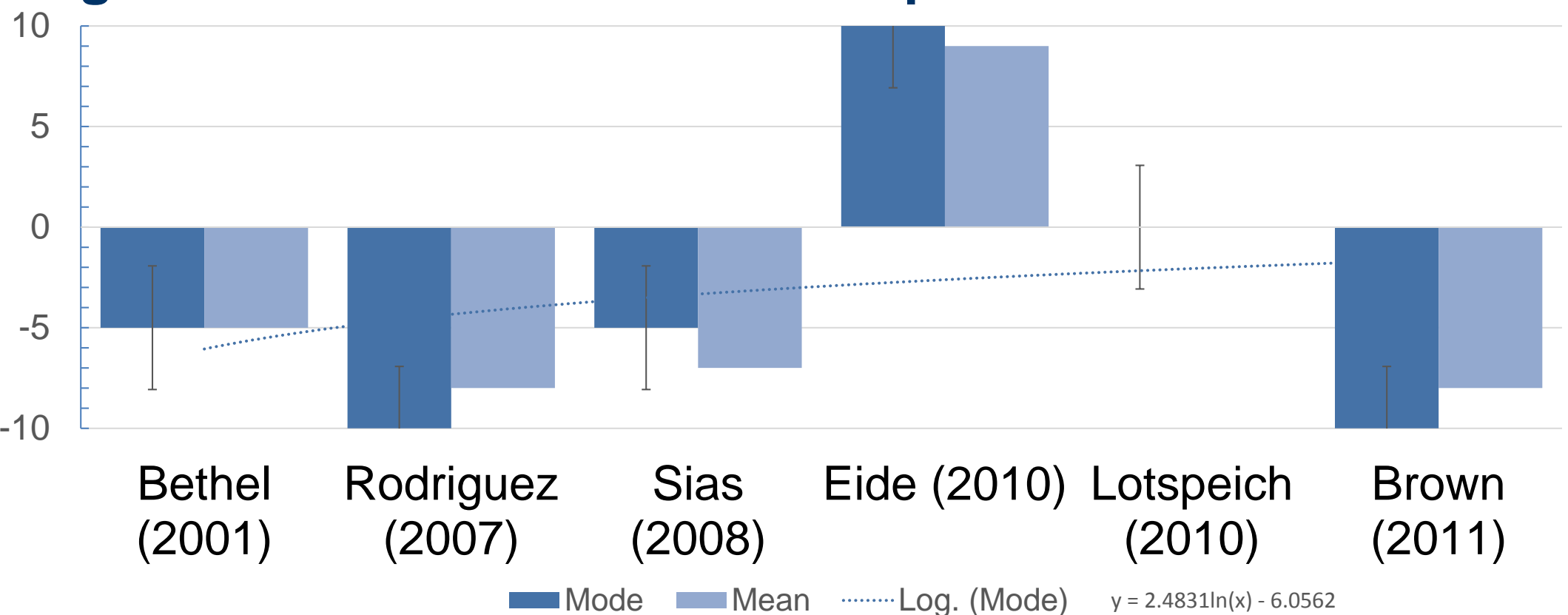
## RESULTS

### Fig. 2 – LEAs perceived as a tool of social identity

Bethel (2001), Rodriguez (2007), Sias (2008), Eide (2010), Lotspeich (2010), Brown (2011)
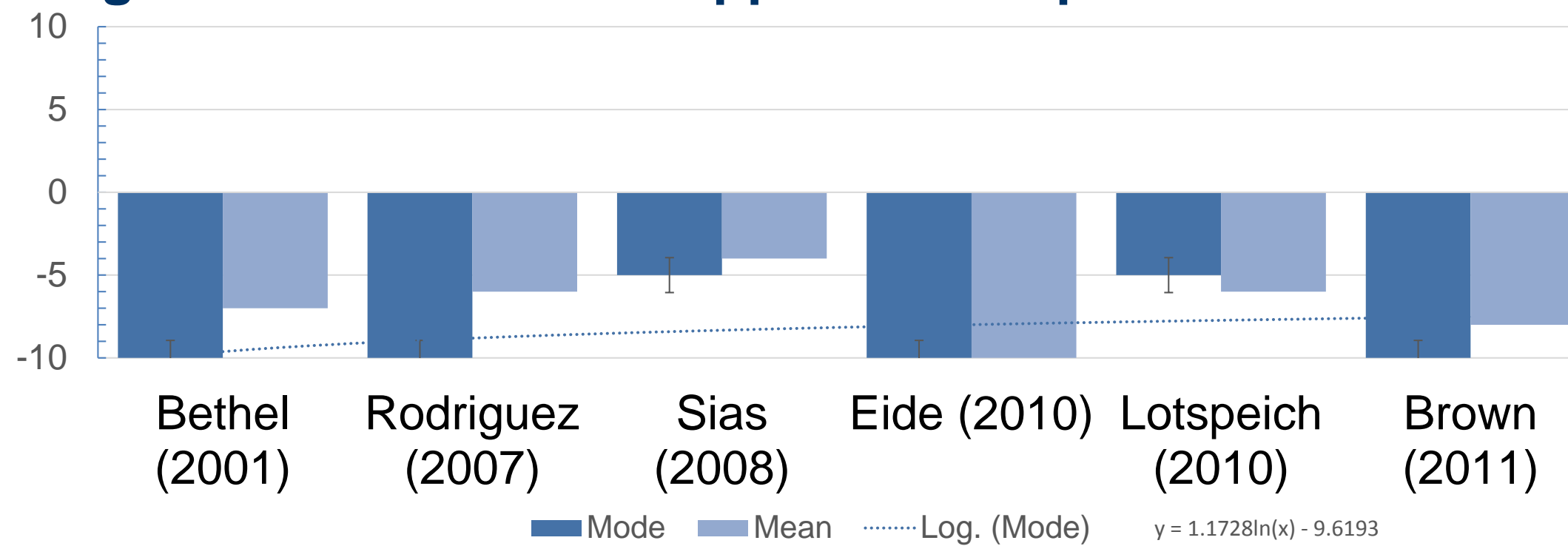
Mode | Mean | Log. (Mode) | y = 1.8185ln(x) + 3.0059

- **H(0)1: There will be a correlation with Howley, Johnson, & Petrie's (2011) perspective of LEAs as a tool of social identity. (+10)**
  - Sandy Mush, the community observed in Brown's (2011) case study, lost "its school, its post office, and its separate identity" when students were transported to schools ten miles away (p. 154).
  - Community members saw their school as the center, or "the centerpiece of the community" (Bethel, 2001, p. 144).

### Fig. 3 – LEA economies of scale perceived

Bethel (2001), Rodriguez (2007), Sias (2008), Eide (2010), Lotspeich (2010), Brown (2011)

Mode | Mean | Log. (Mode) | y = 2.4831ln(x) - 6.0562

- **H(R)2: There will be a correlation with Smith's (1938) perspective of the economies of scale model in educational operations and administration. (-10)**
  - A transition from agricultural and manufacturing jobs to positions in the lower-paying service industry led to an increased level of community poverty that brought decreased tax revenues for LEAs and closure of local businesses (Schafft, Killeen, & Morrissey, 2010; Groenke & Nespor, 2010).
  - In multiple case studies in the sample, community members "perceived cost savings" as "larger districts displayed effective uses of finances," even if the literature and research presented a contrasting viewpoint (Eide, 2010, p. 65; Bethel, 2001, p. 143).

### Fig. 4 – Additional LEA opportunities perceived

Bethel (2001), Rodriguez (2007), Sias (2008), Eide (2010), Lotspeich (2010), Brown (2011)

Mode | Mean | Log. (Mode) | y = 1.1728ln(x) - 9.6193

- **H(R)3: There will be a correlation with Smith's (1938) perspective of a more 'diverse' educational institution in regards to academic and extra-curricular opportunities. (-10)**
  - Detroit [,Oregon] community members acknowledged "that it was becoming increasingly difficult to maintain programs locally" and were happy for the opportunities the larger high school offered (Eide, 2010, p. 65).
  - Community members perceived that their children were "better off" attending the new schools because of their increased curricular options, availability of electives and advanced courses, and more enrichment opportunities (Lotspeich, 2010; Eide, 2010; Bethel, 2001).

## DISCUSSION / IMPLICATIONS

This research reveals that community members perceptions vary between the case study dissertations and, thus, more research must be completed to determine the conditions or methodologies that create these disparities. Two-fold, this research verifies that certain portions of Smith (1938) and Howley, Johnson, & Petrie's (2011) assertions are contemporary perceptions of interviewed community members in published research. Limitations included a publication bias, coders from one type of population, and the idea that an 'overall' conclusion cannot be drawn due to spatial differences in social geography. Future research should utilize a larger sample size, attempt to measure perceptions in case studies with a different methodology, calculate statistical significance, account for differing spatial environments, and investigate how these perceptions are derived.

These statistics [and literature] reveal that in recent case study research (1) community members perceive their social identity is diminished through local education agency reorganization [but repaired through athletic success], (2) community members perceive cost savings [but these savings are not always universal and feasibility studies should be utilized], and (3) community members perceive larger schools offer more sections or elective courses.

### GLOSSARY

**Reorganization** – According to the Illinois State Board of Education, reorganization is the umbrella term which includes consolidation, school district conversion, partial elementary unit district formation, annexation (detachment and dissolution), high school deactivation, and cooperative high school attendance centers.

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