

Comparing and Contrasting City Schools and Rural Schools and Providing Case Examples in the U.S. and Abroad

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1. Introduction: Defining Rural and City Schools

According to Koziol, Arthur, Hawley, Bovaird, Bash, McCormick, and Welch (2015), the term rural is a theoretical construct, so identifying a theoretical perspective of rural is a critical first step in conducting research on rural education. Most operational definitions of rural used in quantitative research are grounded in demographic and spatially based theories, while some are based on political-economic theories and socio-cultural theories (Koziol, Arthur, Hawley, Bovaird, Bash, McCormick, & Welch, 2015). Kettler, Puryear, and Mullet (2016) also argue that definitions of rurality in education research are inconsistent, making generalization across studies difficult at best. When the researchers reviewed published research in rural education between 2005 to 2015, they found that a common technique for classifying rural schools is the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) locale code and argue that NCES locale codes fall short of most conceptual understandings of rural and recommend a school size filter to address the mismatch between NCES codes and conceptual understandings of rurality. Based on the aforementioned research, a point to note in comparing and contrasting rural and city schools is that definitions and methodologies differ from researcher to researcher, and findings are often not generalizable. For this reason, when applying the findings to a local context, the generalized findings need to be taken with a grain of salt. With that caveat explained, some of the similarities and differences of city versus rural schools based on current research will be broadly covered followed by case examples in sections two and three. This will be followed by case examples with mixed findings in section four. Broad coverage will help inform readers at one interpretation of similarities and differences that can be made based on the current research. It is hoped that readers familiar with their own educational con-

texts can see how the interpretations made are aligned or misaligned with their own contexts. This way, readers can reflect on the similarities and differences, and learn more deeply about their own educational contexts. Lastly, the broad analysis sheds light on the difficulty of comparing city and local schools with the current literature and the way that individual researchers approach their research.

2. Similarities Between City Schools and Rural Schools: Not as disadvantageous as one had thought for rural schools in terms of professional development opportunities

According to Glover, Nugent, Chumney, Ihlo, Shapiro, Guard, Koiol, and Bovaird (2016), when differences in professional development practices between rural and non-rural settings were examined via national survey, rural teachers did not appear comparatively disadvantaged, at least not in terms of their best professional development experiences. They reported comparable characteristics for professional development such as providers, hours, practice and feedback opportunities, and collaboration opportunities. Further, when including both rural and non-rural teachers, time in professional development was found to be a significant predictor of their pedagogical content knowledge. Furthermore, related to school personnel, according to Goforth, Yosai, Brown, and Shindorf (2017), rural psychologists served more schools, had fewer years of experience, and spent significantly more time traveling, yet had shared a similar access to a variety of interventions and professional development opportunities.

2.1 Case examples of professional development opportunities in rural and city schools:

Peltola, Haynes, Clymer, McMillan, and Williams (2017) investigated opportunities for teacher professional development in Oklahoma rural and nonrural schools by analyzing responses to a spring 2016 survey on professional development administered to public elementary and secondary school principals and found that a majority of rural schools in Oklahoma offer many types of professional development structures for teachers such as conferences and workshops. However, the shares of schools offering each structure are generally higher for nonrural schools than rural schools, and that is especially true for collaborative learning activities and formal coaching or mentoring. Also, although most schools have at least one local team that plans professional development, such planning

teams are less common in rural schools than in non-rural schools. In both rural and nonrural schools, the biggest barrier to teachers attending any type of professional development is scheduling conflicts with other school or professional activities, and that barrier is more prevalent for rural teachers than for nonrural teachers. Finally, among schools that offer each type of professional development, rural schools do provide substantial support for these offerings but the nonrural schools offering each type generally provide more peer-based support than their rural counterparts.

One potential solution is video conferencing. Maher and Prescott (2017) pointed out that rural and remote schools face many challenges including those related to distance, isolation, and professional development opportunities, and examined a project in which mathematics and science teachers were provided with professional development opportunities via video conferencing to help them use syllabus documents to develop their teaching programs. The results demonstrated that teacher professional development via video conferencing has both strengths and weaknesses but can support teachers through collaboration to develop their expertise in writing teaching programs. According to Williams (2018), in rural Oklahoma, some examples of barriers to participating in professional development opportunities in rural settings include scheduling conflicts and insufficient staff to teach the students while the teachers are attending professional development sessions. Furthermore, it was found that collaborative learning opportunities were found to be an important component of a good professional development session. The participants felt that professional development opportunities should be offered in a variety of ways: in-person, virtually, and as blended or both. With this information, the Oklahoma State Department of Education (OSDE) worked on addressing some of the identified challenges by launching an effort to increase PD quality and rigor through three complementary strategies. First, OSDE implemented research-based professional learning standards that include detailed guidance for high-quality professional development. Second, they are developing a learning management system to support virtual, ongoing, job-embedded collaborative learning across the state that would allow them to address some of the identified distance challenges. Finally, they newly adopted a teacher and leader evaluation system that has a professional learning focus guided by the Every Student Succeeds Act and the professional learning standards.

3. Differences Between City Schools and Rural Schools: More likely to propose an educational tax referendum in rural schools

Yadavalli, Waldorf, and Florax (2017) found that rural districts were significantly more likely than urban school districts to propose a tax referendum to attain additional funds. In more than 80 percent of all school districts that had proposed a referendum, voters were supportive of proposed increase, voter approval of educational referendum was slightly more likely in rural districts to be approved, and White school districts were significantly more likely to propose an educational tax referendum than racially diverse school districts that tend to be in rural areas (Yadavalli, Waldorf, & Florax, 2017). However, according to Kettler, Russell, and Puryear (2015), when 1,029 school districts were examined, it was found that rural schools with larger economically disadvantaged populations allocate proportionally less fiscal and human resources to gifted education services, and racial-ethnic diversity, property wealth, and overall expenditures per student accounted for relatively little of the variance in funding and staffing gifted programs. There seems to be a desire to improve rural education. However, some rural schools seem to be struggling to obtain financial resources to serve students with varying needs.

3.1 Case examples for tax referendums and struggles to obtain financial resources in rural and city schools

According to the Minnesota Rural Education Association (2017), since 2002, school districts in Minnesota have increasingly been relying on operating referendums and other local levies to meet the educational needs of students. 20 districts in the rural districts of Minnesota are seeking increase in operating referendums, whereas 15 districts in the city are asking for an increase (Minnesota Rural Education Association, 2017). Cornelius (2017) points out that in Wisconsin, some state lawmakers are seeking to restrict the ability of Wisconsin residents to raise new resources for schools by banning certain types of school referendums, which could be harmful for rural school districts with many districts struggling to manage the financial effects of declining enrollments. Since 2012, Wisconsin voters passed referendums that increased rural school district budgets by \$11.4 million a year on a permanent basis, and given that 60,000 students are attending rural school districts in Wisconsin, that averaged out to an increase of \$190 per student in rural school districts or permanent referendums (Cornelius, 2017). According to Cornelius (2017), in

comparison, nonrural school districts passed permanent referendums that increased school district budgets by \$72.3 million a year over this period, for an average of \$91 per student, less than half the amount per student that voters in rural districts approved. According to Reinan and Coolican (2017), when a district in Wisconsin asks voters for money to build a new school or to renovate an old one, individual farms may wind up paying several hundred thousand dollars in additional taxes over the life of a 20 or 30 year construction bond, and many have understood the issue with referendums being rejected rooted in a divide between farmers and city dwellers over who should bear the brunt of the funding in rural districts where the tax base is heavily dependent on agricultural land. An example of a school in Wisconsin, having a difficult time with funding is Turtle Lake School District. According to Gordon (2016), the district put forth a pair of ballot questions in November 2016 that would have raised a total of \$5.3 million for building maintenance, operations, and replacing an unsafe running track at one of the schools but failed with 38 percent of the vote in favor and 62 against. Also, the broader infrastructure-related question failed by a smaller margin of 46 percent in favor and 54 against.

4. Contradictory Findings: Case Examples

4.1 Educational Performance of Students

Educational performance is typically the academic performance of students that are examined that involve tests of knowledge. However, here, a case of creativity is included as that can help students solve verbal and quantitative problems that are directly related to their academic performance. With that said, based on case studies within the past five years, it is uncertain that rural and city schools contribute to differences in educational performance of students, as outcomes seem to vary case by case. For instance, according to Huang (2015), when rural-nonrural differences in students' mathematics performance was examined in Taiwan, among fourth-graders, a widening gap in student performance between rural and nonrural areas was not observed over the period from 2003 to 2011. In addition, variation in student performance predominantly occurs within rural and nonrural areas and not between them. Moreover, students in rural areas vary in performance to about the same degree as students in nonrural areas, and most low-performing students are located in cities and towns and only about one-quarter of the low-performing students are located in rural areas, which is contrary to public opinion on rural-nonrural differences in student achievement in Taiwan that those in rural areas are generally poor

performers.

In the U.S. context, Gagnon and Mattingly (2018) found that urban schools have White-Black and White-Hispanic achievement gaps 16 percent and 22 percent smaller, respectively, than those found in city schools. The overall impression of rural school being worse than city schools is challenged here as well. The researchers examine rural and urban in terms of historical, cultural, economic and educational differences. In particular, for educational differences, they note that the characteristics of rural places also lead to differences in schooling between urban and rural schools. Specifically, they note that White students from more affluent backgrounds can have wholly different lived experiences in terms of peer interactions, neighborhood safety, larger more metropolitan locations, neighborhood safety and enrichment activities compared to the experiences of poorer minority students in the same district. This points to the issue that the divide of rural and urban districts is not only complicated by the researchers not having a common definition but also by racial differences that are often accompanied by differences in social class and social status (Cushner, McClelland, & Safford, 2015). Furthermore, with regards to creativity, when Mali and Kumar (2017) examined the differences among male and female secondary school students studying in both private and government schools in India in the Jammu city, it was found that there were no significant differences among genders coming from urban and rural areas on overall creative thinking. The researchers, however, give no definition as to what they mean by rural and urban.

However, when research with data from the China Family Panel Survey and the Rural-Urban Migration in China survey to compare the education performance of rural children, children of rural-to-urban migrants, and urban children over the period of 2009 to 2010 was conducted, results show that education performance of rural children and migrants' children is significantly lower than that of their urban counterparts. This was even after accounting for differences in personal attributes such as nutrition and parenting style. Moreover, Zhu and Chan (2015) examined data from a random representative sample of 3,175 middle school students aged 15 to 17 years by self-administered questionnaires to estimate the prevalence of child bullying victimization in Xi'an, China. They found that correlates for direct and relational bullying victimization not only includes factors such as father's lower education level and unemployment but also the fact that a student is from rural schools. Bullying can be linked to educational performance of students as well. Also, when Gan, Meng, and Xie (2016) examined school readiness differences in a sample of rural and urban preschool children from Zunyi, China, using the School Readiness Test Bat-

tery, results indicated that rural children scored lower on emotional and social skills, basic knowledge, and language competence subtests than did urban students. However, they scored higher on sport skills, and understanding of both time and space.

4.2 Educational Leadership

Like promoting optimal educational performance of students, research suggests that educational leadership needs to tailor its approach to local needs that also are from case to case. When Parson, Hunter, and Kallio (2016) used qualitative survey data and focus groups to explore experiences of the North Dakota rural principal, it was found that principals' roles, power, and constraints in rural schools differ according to enrollment size. The researchers suggest professional development programs that are tailored to meet the needs of the rural principal with an eye to providing experiences in transformative leadership. According to Stewart and Matthews (2015), when principals in rural Utah where districts are small and isolated were investigated, they found that small school principals have different needs and practices when compared to medium sized rural school principals. Specifically, small school principals reported having spent two hours less in collaborating with and mentoring their teachers than did medium school principals. The researchers recommend that district and state administrators and policy makers target small school principals to provide the needed professional development to assist them in an already isolated and overloaded position.

In terms of teachers, when Handal, Watson, Petocz, and Maher (2018) examined 191 secondary teachers from 27 rural and remote schools in the State of New South Wales in Australia, findings revealed that a number of factors make possible their attraction to rural and remote communities. The researchers do not clearly define rural and remote schools. However, they point out by combining their own understanding with citing the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training, and Youth Affairs (2007) that: features of rural and remote locations include not only great distances from centres of high population but also relatively small "population size, movement an density relative to metropolitan centres, including the requirement for young people to have to move to larger centres to access further education and training (MCEETYA, 2007, p.3). The teachers were attracted not only by the opportunity to secure a permanent position, but also because of the attraction of a rural ambiance, a stronger sense of collegiality, and gaining experience and exposure in rural education. Specifically, respondents were more likely to move to rural and remote schools because they (a) grew up in a rural area with

family connections in rural areas, (b) were female with family connections in rural areas, and (c) were in the 18 to 30 year age range and wanted to have rural teaching experience. In China, there is an effort to attract qualified teachers to rural areas through policy reform (Xue & Li, 2017). According to Xue and Li (2017), the key factors that pose challenges to the expansion of the teaching force in rural areas of China include poor remuneration and unreasonable deployment of rural teachers as well as ineffective enforcement of teacher exchange policy.

4.3 Health

Another concern for schools when examining recent research is children's health. Findholt, Izumi, Nguyen, Pickus and Chen (2014) assessed the availability of healthy snacks at food stores near schools and found that availability of healthy snack foods and beverages was low in all stores. However, stores near high-income urban schools had higher availability compared to stores near low-income urban and or rural schools. Specifically, stores near rural schools generally had the lowest availability, although several fruits were found more often in rural stores than urban stores. The research points to the importance of prioritizing efforts to increase availability of healthy products especially in stores near rural and low-income schools. In Ghana, both under and over-nutrition were common among school pupils but overweight appeared largely driven by socio-economic-status and urbanization while under nutrition was associated with low SES and rural residency. Related to health, when 103 student essays in a six-year undergraduate medical program at James Cook University in Australia were examined, it was found that no significant differences on the number of positive and negative responses for rural lifestyle and rural practice were found. However, students from capital city areas had significantly more negative views about rural doctor role, especially related to workload, limited resources and isolation than students from rural and regional areas (Young, Lindsay, & Ray, 2016). The researchers conclude that students entering the medical school already have both positive and negative views about the life and work of a rural doctor but those students from capital city areas have significantly more negative views despite being selected to enter a medical course with a rural focus based on their expressed rural perceptions. Negative themes included isolation, limited resources, and financial impacts, which closely resembles typical concerns of education in rural areas. Negative perceptions of lack of resources and isolation prior to working in rural areas can prevent individuals from adjusting well to the environment particularly if one was to move from a rural to a

city district; and such maladjustment may be detrimental to one's health.

5. Conclusion:

In the first section, it was argued that similarities and differences between rural schools and city schools based on generalized findings need to be taken with a grain of salt, since definitions and methodologies of what is *rural* and *city* often vary from researcher to researcher. Furthermore, when searching with key words of *rural* and *city*, current literature using words such as *non-rural* and *urban* were obtained. Moreover, the overall trend in rural and city becomes difficult to generalize not only because of the inconsistent definitions employed by the researchers but also by the fact that issues with race, ethnicity, social class, and social status even within the same areas are inevitably present. In the second section, given those limitations, similarities and differences between city and rural schools were discussed. While popular belief is that rural schools are comparatively disadvantaged compared to city schools, rural teachers did not appear comparatively disadvantaged, at least not in terms of their best professional development experiences. Characteristics in rural schools that are comparable to city schools for professional development such as providers, hours, practice and feedback opportunities, and collaboration opportunities were reported. In section 2.1, specific cases were provided, particularly in rural and nonrural districts. In the third section, a major difference between rural and city schools was discussed. It was argued that referendums were more likely proposed in rural schools, particularly in districts that are economically disadvantaged. In section 3.1, specific cases were provided, since cases in which both rural and city schools were seeking referendums for financial resources emerged through research. Finally, in the fourth section, contradictory research findings related to (1) educational performance of students, (2) educational leadership, and (3) health was described respectively in sections 4.1, 4.2, and 4.3. The research-based case examples from varieties of locations both in the U.S. and abroad illustrate how although national and state policies need to be examined and reexamined as they influence what happens locally, careful attention needs to be paid to varying local needs.

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