

Research in Rural School Districts: An Overview

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to assess the existing scholarly work, or the deficit in it, related to public schools situated in rural regions of the United States. Further, this study underscores the necessity for enhanced academic inquiry and research in rural education, to inform policy and practice. The findings of this study may offer decision-makers in rural school districts pivotal insights into the educational dynamics prevalent in rural schools, in order to gain understanding, establish best practices for these districts, and positively influence the curriculum.

Keywords: rural education, research in rural education, rural schools

Introduction

It is the responsibility of public schools to provide the finest learning environment possible for students, an atmosphere that supports their accomplishments. Driven by research, making decisions to ensure that rural students receive a high-quality education is a difficult task that requires governmental and academic support (National School Boards Association, 2023). Research studies have been conducted on the difficulties faced by suburban and urban schools. However, the research-based literature on rural public schools is relatively thin (Johnson et al., 2021).

Generally speaking, rural school districts have limited access to thorough, objective, and specific research. Rurality may be defined in various ways across federal, regional and state guidelines and perceptions (Gutierrez & Terrones, 2023). The literature shows that the interest in understanding the differences between rural and urban areas has been debated for some time. Despite the substantial number of students enrolled in rural schools, rural education in the United States has persistently been marginalized in both academic discourse and policy discussions (Schafft, 2016). This neglect poses significant challenges for rural America, particularly as public policy and educational practices often conflict with the vitality and well-being of rural communities. Identifying and recognizing these challenges is essential for promoting educational opportunities and effectively addressing the distinct needs of rural schools.

For years, researchers have been working to create a comprehensive agenda for rural education studies, yet their efforts have not garnered sufficient funding or momentum to engage

the broader research community effectively. Educational leaders and policymakers now heavily rely on research-based decision making (Yamashiro et al., 2022). There should be a national, regional, state, and local interest in the underfunding of research in rural education (Johnson et al., 2021). The idea that the rural setting need not be taken too seriously, at least not by the education profession, is accepted by educational researchers. This perspective often stems from a historical bias that views urban environments as the epicenters of innovation and progress, while rural areas are seen as stagnant or less relevant in contemporary educational discourse. Consequently, many studies and policies tend to overlook the unique challenges and opportunities present in rural education (Thier et al., 2021; Villa et al., 2021). Research and development initiatives for rural schools have been proposed to leverage one of their greatest assets, the close ties between the school, the community, and the location in rural public education (Howley et al., 2014).

Methods

Unfortunately, research in rural education is not well-represented in academic journals or studies. To find research articles about education in rural areas, the authors searched for specific words in different online databases. They used tools like Google Scholar, EBSCO, ERIC, and the library search engines from Lamar University. Together, they agreed to focus only on articles that have been peer-reviewed, or reports from organizations that support rural education in the United States.

Rural Schools

In contrast to their suburban and urban counterparts, rural school districts have particular qualities and attributes (Showalter et al., 2023). Over nine million students attend public schools that are classified as rural, comprising nearly one in five of all students (National Association of School Boards, 2023). Such large numbers demonstrate the breadth, significance, and value of rural public education as well as the role that these schools play in educating these pupils. Rural areas are more than just places; they also represent a cultural framework that provides a distinct aesthetic value that cities cannot match, with their serene surroundings, charming landscapes, and tight-knit communities (Biddle & Azano, 2016; Texas Education Agency, 2017; Skyhar, 2020).

The United States Census Bureau (2024) defines and classifies areas with populations of 50,000 or more as urbanized areas; those with populations between 25,000 and 50,000 are designated as urban clusters - rural areas are designated as those areas that do not lie inside an urbanized area or urban cluster (see Table 1).

Table 1*National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) Rural Classifications*

NCES Types	Definition
Fringe	rural territory that is less than or equal to 5 miles from an urban area, as well as a rural territory that is less than or equal to 2.5 miles from an urban cluster.
Distant	rural territory that is more than 5 miles but less than or equal to 25 miles from an urban area, as well as a rural territory that is more than 2.5 miles but less than or equal to 10 miles from an urban cluster.
Remote	rural territory that is more than 25 miles from an urban area and more than 10 miles from an urban cluster.

Living in a rural community has many advantages over urban and suburban living, even though some may argue that certain amenities and opportunities are absent from rural areas (Seelig & McCabe, 2021). By presenting rural in this way, the viewpoint dispels myths and stereotypes about the area and instead highlights the diversity and contributions of rural communities (Greenough & Nelson, 2015). Reacting to these communities' needs, high-quality educational services can be provided (Skyhar, 2020).

Rural schools frequently have smaller student populations. populations enabling a more individualized education and experience (Miller, 2020; Thier et al., 2021). Rural schools and students are shaped by this, including the importance of culture and community, that come together to shape these experiences (Gallagher et al., 2021). Environment can create a supportive and inclusive atmosphere where students feel valued and connected, leading to increased collaboration and camaraderie within the school community (Showalter et al., 2023).

Rural Education Research

The evident shortage of high-caliber research in rural areas, coupled with inadequate financial resources for rural education studies and ambiguous definitions of rural, has resulted in a widespread perception that rural education research is both limited and lacking in quality. (Johnson et.al., 2021). Supported by findings of the U.S. Department of Education, significant scarcities in the public body of exploration, including available raw data on rural schools (Gimple et al., 2020). The obstacles encountered by rural public schools across America are equally challenging and difficult to resolve as those experienced by public schools in suburban and urban areas (National Math & Science Initiative, 2022).

Conversely, research undertaken in suburban and urban public schools may not necessarily be germane to rural school districts (Greenough & Nelson, 2015; Biddle & Azano, 2016; Johnson, 2022). Although a plethora of academic journals addressing educational issues are published, very few academic journals are published specifically addressing rural education issues. Table 2 reflects the number of academic journals, published in the United States that are specifically designated to showcase research in rural education issues.

Table 2*United States Rural Education Academic Journals*

Journal Name	Sponsoring Institution
Journal of Research in Rural Education	Penn State University Libraries
The Rural Educator	Mississippi State University
Chronicle of Rural Education	Oklahoma State University
Theory & Practice in Rural Education	East Carolina University
Journal of Rural Educational Leadership	West Texas A&M University

Locating specific data in rural areas poses a significant challenge for researchers due to the limited availability of resources and information ((Biddle & Azano, 2016).). Often, researchers resort to relying on information that is not current or fully comprehensive, paving the way for possible discrepancies in their findings. (Howley et al., 2014). Earlier assessments of the literature on rural education research are now somewhat antiquated, and none of them particularly address the subject of rural issues (Sowl & Crain, 2021). The lack of established databases and information centers in rural regions makes it difficult to access relevant data for conducting comprehensive research (Henry, 2019). Additionally, the dispersed nature of rural populations and the limited internet connectivity further complicates the process of data collection and analysis.

Research on rural schooling is sometimes misunderstood by educational researchers, as rural schools possess unique characteristics that set them apart from urban and suburban educational settings (Biddle & Azano, 2016). When general research and reform methods are imposed on rural schools; they often do not address the unique problems and circumstances these schools face and are ineffective and temporary (Showalter et al., 2023). Researchers specializing in identifying issues specific to rural education are perceived to be a rarity; as this field of research has been underfunded, unencouraged and taken as a whole, the performing collection of work has suffered for it (Nachtigal & Director, 2019). Such perceptions can hinder progress in research and perpetuate inequalities in education (Barrett et al., 2015).

Unfortunately, much of the rural research literature today appears to surface as a nostalgic tribute to days gone by. Only a small group of researchers is examining issues pertinent to rural education, while funding opportunities for research in these specialized environments are almost non-existent (Greenough & Nelson, 2015). Many of the research studies and reform measures enacted in suburban school districts are not enacted in rural school districts (Howley et al., 2014). When generic research studies and reform measures are imposed on rural schools, the reforms are often short-lived, as they are not germane and meaningless to the rural context (Villa et al., 2021)

Federal and state agencies shoulder the responsibility for the formulation, funding and perpetration of educational programs for all schools, whether they are urban or rural. However, it appears that the interests of urban communities and schools frequently overshadow rural communities and schools (Brenner, 2016; Miller, 2020). The number of elected officials serving a

given area is determined by the size of its population. Rural areas have seen population declines over the last ten years, in some cases, these losses have reached two thirds (Johnson, 2022). In contrast, there was a sharp increase in population in urban areas. As a result, while urban areas continue to have political representation, rural school districts are losing it (Gimple et al., 2020).

The numbers of rural education representatives within the National Education Association and American Association of School Administrators reflects the limited extent of any influence of rural schools and research may have in those organizations (Nachtigal & Director, 2019). Political differences permeate education, particularly when considering cultural identity, collective policy, and limited resources (Yamashiro et al., 2022). Political differences between rural and urban have increased over the past decade (Gimple et al., 2020). As such, rural schools often face difficulty when trying to align their purpose and providing quality education to their students in congruence with state and federal guidelines and mandates (Henry, 2019). Numerous decision makers in rural education and communities believe educational policy is not designed for those settings, and that consideration of policy's unique impact is not a precedence (Jacobs, N., & Munis, B. (2023).

When addressing educational issues, most of that focus has been on urban districts (National Association of School Boards, 2023). Research on rural education is not given much weight by funding sources or other reward systems, it is not considered as prestigious research (Thier et al., 2021). Policymakers need to understand that the diversity of rural education and communities creates challenges for education policy. Conversely, policies regarding education issues rural schools must be strategically focused to meet the unique and distinct needs of the populations within the district (Johnson et al., 2021). Unfortunately, policymakers making decisions about rural education spend relatively little time in rural communities to better understand these unique needs and problems (Brenner, 2016).

Conclusions

Research in rural education remains a vital area of inquiry within the academic and educational community. It is essential for researchers and scholars to dedicate more time to examining the distinct challenges and opportunities encountered by students in rural schools, particularly concerning access, equity, and resource availability. By conducting thorough investigations and analyzing data related to these issues, researchers can uncover effective strategies to enhance organizational performance in rural educational settings. This focused exploration not only contributes to the body of knowledge but also fosters the development of tailored solutions that can significantly improve educational outcomes for rural students.

By shedding light on these important issues, educational leaders and policymakers should be able to inform policy decisions and advocate for the needs of rural students and communities. Qualitative research methods such as observations and interviews with rural community stakeholders can provide a deeper understanding of local perspectives and needs. This approach can help identify specific barriers that are often overlooked in broader quantitative analyses. Moreover, interdisciplinary collaboration among researchers from fields such as sociology, education, public health, and economics can enrich the findings by providing a more holistic view of the issues at hand. By integrating diverse methodologies and theoretical frameworks, researchers can expand the scope and focus of rural educational research.

Perhaps, by applying quantitative statistical methods, researchers can analyze larger datasets to uncover correlations and causal relationships that inform decision-making processes.

This approach allows for the assessment of current practices, identifying not only strengths but also, areas requiring improvement. Utilizing predictive analytics and statistics, researchers may be able predict future trends and outcomes, enabling organizations to proactively plan to address them. The synthesis of quantitative findings with qualitative insights amplifies the relevance and applicability of recommended strategies, ultimately fostering a culture of continuous improvement and innovation within the organization while driving sustainable growth in a competitive landscape. For instance, understanding how geographic isolation impacts educational attainment and employment opportunities in rural areas compared to urban settings could reveal critical gaps in policy and support systems.

Examining the role of technology in addressing research gaps could expand the depth and scope of research activities. Technology can enhance data collection methods through mobile applications, virtual sessions, and other data collection devices. These tools allow for more comprehensive data gathering in real-world settings, improving the reliability and applicability of research outcomes. As a result, studies can be conducted with greater efficiency and accuracy. Community-driven research initiatives that utilize technology for data collection and analysis can help identify specific needs within rural schools and communities. This approach ensures that results are both viable relevant within the rural context. Ultimately, fostering partnerships between technology, local governments, and community organizations will be crucial in developing research opportunities.

In the lack of nationally representative studies, the results of small, regional studies may be helpful. When authors include descriptive and demographic data about the study sites along with detailed descriptions of their rural samples, they can offer comprehensive, rural-specific information that is helpful for comparison. To increase the generalizability of small, region-specific rural studies, more details should be included regarding the demographic characteristics of the study population, such as age, gender, socioeconomic status, and educational background. Additionally, it is essential to provide context about the local culture, economic conditions, and social structures that may influence the findings.

More research, including extensive national or regional studies, that incorporate rural populations, regions, and educational systems could possibly yield fresh insights into the differences between urban and rural problems. Such studies could explore various dimensions, including access to resources, socio-economic factors, cultural influences, and the unique challenges faced by rural communities. Even though many national and regional studies include rural locations, discussions of these experiences and findings may not be frequently not examined or reported unless the study has a specific focus on rural issues. additional academic journals specifically addressing research in rural education; as well as more research in rural education being published in mainstream educational academic journals would add to the existing body of literature. Including information on rural education would contribute to the literature and might be helpful in situations other than the study's original goals and objectives.

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